





VIOLET MORTIMER.

A Novel.

1873.

BY

FRANCES NOBLE.

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VIOLET MORTIMER.

CHAPTER I.

VIOLET's first letter from Norman after his arrival in Alexandria was not a cheering one. His letter to Mrs. Lacy had preceded himself by two or three days, and he found his aunt far from well. The shock of hearing of Mrs. Ashleigh's death, now, when she had expected so soon to see her again, had been very great, and her bodily health was suffering in consequence. She would be too weak to leave Alexandria for some days yet; but as she had been a little better since she had Norman with her, he trusted the worst was past and that she would soon be able to resume her journey under his escort. But Violet's heart sank as she told herself it might be otherwise, that Mrs. Lacy might be ill a long time, and be quite unable to travel just yet; and she remembered that other absence of Norman's,

when she and Mrs. Ashleigh had looked in every letter for the news of his return, and it had been so long in coming. And as, many a time over, she read Norman's fond and anxious enquiries about herself, lingering on each tender expression and at last pressing the precious letter to her lips, Violet wondered how she would bear it if Norman's absence was doomed to be much longer than they had both expected. How slowly the hours had passed since his departure, and now this fear had come! Violet could only sigh at the recollection of the bright days when their union had seemed so near to herself and Norman, and bidding her longing heart be patient, she sat down to write a long, long letter to her absent lover, for it seemed to bring him nearer, as she wrote all her thoughts to him, telling him everything as she would have done had he been by her side.

Since Norman's departure Mr. Wilmot still continued to call at Westford House, but seemed resolved to adhere to his promise not to annoy Violet. Mrs. Mortimer was considerably relieved to find that, watch as she would, there was nothing to complain of in his conduct, for it would not have been an

easy task to have put an end to his visits altogether, and it was a satisfaction to feel that she was doing her duty to Violet and yet retaining a visitor whose company was so pleasant to herself as Louis Wilmot's.

And Violet could now escape more easily from the room when he was present, since Mrs. Mortimer was aware of her own and Norman's dislike to his society. It was natural that Violet should feel a greater repugnance to him than ever since he had persisted so ungenerously in revenging himself on her by his attentions to her even in Norman's presence, delighting in her embarrassment and his exasperation. But in her letters to Norman now she could assure him that though Mr. Wilmot still visited her stepmother, he no longer obtruded himself on her notice. It happened more than once that when he called, Mrs. Mortimer was keeping her room unwell, and it fell to Eleanor's lot to entertain him, and from her he learnt that Norman might possibly not return as soon as he had expected. Violet did not know exactly in what terms Mr. Wilmot and Eleanor regarded each other; but from their behaviour she supposed it was with nothing more than mutual cold-

ness, or even dislike, being totally ignorant of the one interest they had in common. And for some reason or other, Eleanor still acted, though Norman was absent, with apparent goodwill towards Violet, who might be excused for supposing that perhaps Eleanor, like her mother, was really learning to regard her with affection, and she began to hope that it might be possible before she left them to use her influence to dispel the discord which existed between Mrs. Mortimer and her daughter.

And Nelly Woodford wrote often, as she promised, cheering letters, yet full of sympathy, to Violet. Since Miss Woodford's marriage her correspondence with Eleanor Gordon had gradually ceased. Her husband had not been much prepossessed by Eleanor at Windermere, and though she herself still cherished a feeling of friendship for her, all active correspondence between them had ceased. Nelly, though rejoicing that it was so, jokingly held it up as an example of what she had so often spoken of, namely, that marriage is a great destroyer of friendship, and she wrote in one of her letters to Violet,—

“ You and I, you know, Violet, are to be an

exception to the rule ; Mr. Ashleigh himself has promised to see that it is so."

And so the days passed on until Norman's second letter came from Alexandria. If Violet had indulged in hopes that the days which had elapsed since he wrote first would have seen a change for the better in Mrs. Lacy, she was doomed to be disappointed. Norman could not conceal his anxiety, even in his letter. His aunt was no better ; she was still obliged to keep her bed, and in her weak state, the fatigue of the journey was beginning to tell upon her, though she had not felt it before.

"It is well I am with her, Norman wrote. "Poor aunt ! she is continually regretting keeping me from you ; but I tell her she does not know you if she thinks you would have me to leave her now. Pray, my darling, that my next letter may take you happier news, that it may not be long before I embrace you again."

Violet did not know the malicious pleasure which this news afforded to Eleanor, or how the jealous heart triumphed in her anxiety and the increasing desire, which might be long unsatisfied, for Norman's return. She would

have wondered less could she have known how Louis Wilmot gloated over the separation between herself and Norman, how his revengeful heart pondered it over, wondering how long it would last, rejoicing in their mutual yearnings to see each other again, knowing the anxiety the suspense must cause them. Violet tried to make her long, frequent letters to Norman as bright as she could, always sending kind messages to his aunt, bidding her not to think her so selfish as not to be glad that Norman was with her, and saying how she longed to welcome her home safe and well, with him.

But each letter from Norman contained only a repetition of the bad news. At times she was better and able to go out, but the improvement never lasted more than a day or two, and to attempt to continue the journey might have been very dangerous to her. Though as yet Norman had not directly said so, Violet feared, nay knew, it must be his aunt's formerly threatened malady that was perhaps coming only too surely now.

The news she had feared came at last, in a sad letter from Norman, when he had been absent about two months. Mrs. Lacy would

never see England again, never embrace Violet, as she had hoped; consumption had surely laid its hand upon her, this time without any hope, and it was but a question as to how long death might be deferred. The shock of Mrs. Ashleigh's death had undermined the slender fabric of strength and apparently recovered health, and the doctors now were of opinion that even if it had not been so, a residence in England would have had eventually the same effect. So Mrs. Lacy was dying, in a strange land, and Norman, her only tie on earth now, must stay with her to the end.

“ May God keep you safe and well for me, my darling, my little Violet, so far away, but nearer every day to my heart,” were the concluding words of his letter to Violet.

And Violet tried to school herself to be patient, not to repine, however long Norman's absence might be, however long it might be before she became really his own. And with her weak hand Mrs. Lacy wrote herself to Violet,—

“ I too would have wished to see you and Norman united; but it may not be, and now the hardest part to bear is the thought that I am keeping him so long away from you.

If I could only send him to you at the appointed time, to bring you back his wife, if I live so long ! ”

Ay, if it had only been possible ! echoed Violet’s heart as she read ; but she knew it was not, and she wrote to Norman’s aunt with all the earnestness of her generous nature, that even could he have thought of such a thing, she would not have consented that he should leave her for however short a time. How could she grudge Norman to his aunt, lonely and dying as she was !

But none the less was the yearning for his presence, for the sight of his face and the sound of his voice, or the anxiety, concealed as well as might be from those around, but shown plainly, though almost unconsciously, in the letters Violet wrote to her two dear friends, Mrs. Arnott and Nelly Woodford.

Spring had come round again, and with it the day on which Norman and Violet were to have been married, and the end was very near now for Mrs. Lacy. With the utmost care she could not last more than a few weeks, Norman had written in his last letter, telling Violet also how calmly

his aunt was dying, and how grateful she felt that her last illness had not come to her in India, without him near her.

As the time went on Mrs. Mortimer was growing to wonder very much how she would be able to part with Violet when the day should come at last, and she would be abandoned again to Eleanor's tender mercies. And yet she felt she was selfish, as she watched the small graceful figure move so noiselessly about the room for fear of disturbing her, and as she began to notice the longing, wistful look in the soft eyes, more especially whenever Violet spoke of Norman.

Mr. Wilmot still came to the house; but he gave Violet no cause for complaint now, and if she had not been too much occupied with other thoughts, she might have noticed that latterly when he had called he had been extremely anxious for Eleanor's company, and that on one or two occasions they had been alone for an unusual length of time; Eleanor being silent and abstracted after these interviews with him.

But Violet was thinking of other things, and only perceived, as she had always done, that Eleanor never spoke to her of Mr. Wil-

mot otherwise than with indifference or even dislike, expressing a wish sometimes that he would leave London.

Violet still excused herself from visiting with Eleanor, with sufficient cause on account of Mrs. Ashleigh's recent death, and Mrs. Lacy's illness. And how could she care for pleasure or gaiety when Norman was so far away on so sad a duty? what were large assemblies and brilliant circles to her, when the one noble face and form which alone could satisfy her longing eyes were not present?

CHAPTER II.

NORMAN ASHLEIGH sat by his aunt's side as she lay on her bed in one of their apartments in their hotel at Alexandria. It was one of her low, weak days, which seemed to show how near the end was, and on which Norman's presence seemed the only thing she could enjoy. The room was shaded to keep out the bright sunlight, and Mrs. Lacy had fallen into a half-slumber. Norman had been reading, but the book was laid aside now, and he was busy with his own thoughts, with the ever present one of Violet Mortimer, his own Violet, his promised wife. It was more than four months since he had seen her, nearly a year since their mutual love had been spoken.

His mother had been taken away, his last remaining relative lay dying near him, and the young girl, dearer than any relative, however loved, could ever be, would be his all in

the world, and at the thought there was an intense yearning to press her to his heart, to look again into the soft eyes he loved so well.

“Spare us long to each other!” was Norman’s unspoken prayer at that moment.

He was aroused by the entrance of one of his aunt’s servants, who brought him a letter. It bore the English postmark, and the address looked to him like Eleanor Gordon’s handwriting, for he had seen it in her letters to Violet. Eleanor Gordon writing to him! What could it mean? Could Violet be ill? And in the agony of this idea, Norman stood for a minute with the letter unopened in his hand. Then looking at his aunt, he saw she was asleep, and going to the further end of the room, he opened the letter. As he did so, an enclosure, which looked like a note, fell out, and he kept it in his hand whilst he read Eleanor’s letter, first looking at the signature to satisfy himself it was really from her. The letter was as follows:—

“WESTFORD HOUSE.

“DEAR MR. ASHLEIGH,—

“When you read further, you will know how painful and repugnant a task I have

undertaken in writing these lines to you. Even now I hesitate to go on, but I have no choice between this and aiding deception. You and I are not very well acquainted, and it may have been that you have thought what my mother in her fretfulness has not hesitated to tell you, that I was anxious for Violet's marriage so as to be rid of her from our home. Perhaps I do you an injustice, for I think you know that if in the past all was not quite pleasant between Violet and myself, and that I was most to blame perhaps, yet that since she returned to us I have tried to make amends and be on sisterly terms. I may seem cold and not given to demonstrations, but I do feel for you now when you hear what has fallen to my knowledge. There have been times, even before you went away, when I have thought you somewhat blinded, and I have since felt persuaded of it; but until this proof was forced upon me, nothing should have induced me, even were it my duty, to interfere, for it is at best a distasteful task. Two days since, as Mr. Wilmot had just left the house, I found the enclosed note near the place where he had sat. It must have fallen from his

pocket-book, and was not in an envelope, so that I saw at once who had written it. I was so astonished as to forget I had no right to read what was not meant for my eye, and had gone on from line to line before I fully understood what I was doing. I would have given worlds then not to have read it; what was I to do with such a letter, what use must I make of the knowledge that had come to me? I could not bring myself to restore it to Mr. Wilmot; I could not help to keep such a secret. I send the letter to you, Mr. Ashleigh; to you I leave it to act further. Any expressions now on my part would only be useless. All I ask is that Violet may not know who is your informant. It may be cowardly in me; but, after all, we are as sisters, and it would but again raise discord between us, and entail ceaseless reproach upon me. If I had only not found the letter! But I suppose I ought not to wish that. I have already written at too great length, and it is needless to trouble you further.

“ Believe me, Mr. Ashleigh,

“ Yours very truly,

“ ELEANOR GORDON.

“P. S.—I believe Violet is writing to you by this mail.

“*June, 18—*”

If a thunderbolt had fallen near Norman just then, he would scarcely have heard it. Hardly waiting to read the concluding lines of Eleanor's letter, he tore away the paper folded round the enclosed note, and saw at once it was from Violet to Mr. Wilmot, written on the note-paper stamped with her initials, which he himself was accustomed to receive from her. Norman's hand trembled slightly, and his lips were tightly compressed as he read,—

“*WESTFORD HOUSE, May 30th, 18—*

“**DEAR MR. WILMOT,—**

“I have opened your note and the package; it was a risk to give them me last night. The bracelet is very pretty, but of course you know I cannot wear it yet. Oh, Mr. Wilmot, why am I so unhappy? Why am I situated like this, outwardly engaged to Norman Ashleigh, knowing now that it is only friendship I feel for him! I ought to have known it before, I see

now, if only by the repugnance I always felt to hear him speak so hardly of you, while I appeared to agree with what he said; but you are right in saying that from the first I was afraid of him, and that he possessed great influence over me. But he does love me, I know, and I was so very young, and had never seen any other but him, and was flattered and influenced so by his devotion, that I fancied my girlish admiration for him was love. I don't know why I write all this, for you have made me admit it before; but it does me good, I think, when I feel so frightened and unhappy, to tell it you all again, you whom Norman Ashleigh would have me believe unworthy even of my friendship. You ask if it is better to wait his return before letting him know the truth. Mr. Wilmot, I dare not write it to him; I could not frame a letter telling him he has been deceived, that all the time I was seeming so distressed about his going away, I was so relieved and joyful that I was afraid of betraying myself sometimes. And his mother was so kind to me always! It is weak in me to be afraid; but I know I could not do it. I must even

let him be in ignorance, dreadful as it is, and let you do as you wish, take on yourself the burden of undeceiving him on his return. And when will that be? But for your sake, I could wish the time deferred long. I almost hear you say I am unkind, for will you not be by me to help me to bear his reproaches? I have been betrayed into writing so much of all this, because it is so wretched having such a secret, and I must speak of it to *you*. You will forgive me, as you have already forgiven all my unkindness to you in the past, when I was reluctantly misled by others' prejudice. I shall be in N—— Street at four to-morrow afternoon.

“Ever your loving
“VIOLET MORTIMER.”

Twice through Norman read the letter, slowly, as though to convince himself he read aright. Then he sat down, with a strange look on his pale face as he passed his hand across his brow, as though bewildered—a strange look—the only outward expression of the agony which he was inwardly undergoing at that moment. He

was again aroused in a minute or two by a knock at the door, and his aunt's maid handed him in another letter.

"It was overlooked, sir, amongst the other letters for the hotel," she said, and then retired.

It was from Violet; he had been expecting one by to-day's mail. On opening it he saw at once she wrote as usual, and the knowledge seemed to waken him from his half stupor. Even the endearing terms at the beginning and end of the letter were only fresh evidences of falsehood and deception. Then, as he stood there, there rushed over his mind the recollection of words concerning Louis Wilmot which Violet had spoken, which he had thought were only in kindness and charity, but which he should have seen sprung from her partiality for the man he hated. And how easily he had let her satisfy him, that evening when he had suffered his jealous suspicion to escape him! He could have trusted her to the world's end; he had fondly imagined he knew her every thought; he had loved her even when she was little more than a child; and she had deceived him, proving, at best, shamefully

weak, if not heartless, scarcely more worthy of his affection than that other one of whom he had told her, and for whom his love had been but as a fleeting breath compared to that which he had lavished on herself. Even now he could not *realize* it, could not have believed it, but for that fatal note, that condemning proof from which there was no appeal ; and as Norman's eye rested on it again, there was an expression on his face which might have boded danger to Louis Wilmot, had he been near. Then in his bewilderment he tried to think how it could all have been, whether Violet had always been secretly inclined towards Louis Wilmot, or whether her passion for him was but of recent growth ; and the thought came over him that but for his mother's death Violet would have married him, and have perhaps discovered too late that she had no wife's love in her heart for him ; and at the idea Norman bowed his head, almost thanking God for the present misery. Then he gathered up the letters, and sending for one of their servants to remain with his aunt, he went to his own room, where he darkened the window still more to keep out

the sunlight which streamed into the room, mocking the darkness which had fallen on his life. Then he lighted a candle, and without again reading Violet's last letter to himself—for he could not have borne the perusal—he held it over the flame until it was burnt to ashes, only remembering when he had done so that it would have been better to have kept it to send back to her, as he would have to send the rest of her letters.

For nearly an hour he stayed there in his room, alone with his agony, with his bitter overwhelming recollections, with the thought of the future, and the fierce passion of wounded love and pride within him.

“How *can* I have been so utterly blinded and infatuated by her?” was his quick, stern self-questioning, in his bewilderment at what had come to him.

“‘Afraid of me!’ she says! miserable girl! And is she not afraid of the wretch into whose power she is putting herself? How *can* it be! she must be mad! And she would have gone on deceiving me, until—that man chose to let me know the truth! She would have deferred the exposure of her weakness and treachery as long as possible!

It is for me now to save them the trouble of acquainting me with it ; ” and with a quick action he drew writing materials towards him as he sat down at the table.

“ Better to do it at once ; as well now as later ; ” but that the proud, strong nature found it no easy task, supported even as it was by stern, terrible indignation, was shown by the perceptible quivering of Norman’s lips. Violet, his little Violet, false ! and by her *own* testimony ! And if anyone had told it to him, *nothing* should have approached even to making him listen. “ I thought her truth *itself*.”

And as Norman leaned his head on his hand, there came over him, even in the midst of his fierce passion, a feeling of pity for the young girl who could not love him, and was afraid to tell him so, the chivalrous compassion of a strong, tender man’s heart for suffering of which he was the unwitting cause ; for do what he would, he could not think of Violet as bad and heartless, like Cécile, but only as weak, false and worthless, perhaps, but all through weakness.

“ Poor little thing ! Why did I not find it out long ago ? Why did I win her so soon ? ”

and the vision of the sweet face rose up before him, the remembrance of the past happy days, with their seemingly mutual love and confidence, maddening him afresh as he strove to realize the present. But the indignant thought, "Under it all there was the weak, deceptive nature, which I could not see underneath the veil of a pair of sweet, truthful-looking eyes!" banished the pity from his face and heart, and roused him to his stern duty, and with a bitter look on his face, he took his pen firmly into his hand and wrote quickly for the next few minutes. His task finished, he folded and addressed the letter and put it away to await posting.

It was as though the links were broken which bound him to love and hope and all life's gentler feelings, and henceforth he must be alone.

"She is like the rest of them, and I was a fool to be deceived a second time. Henceforth I must learn wisdom, for my time for dreams is over," and the haughty lip curled with a smile so bitter as would have made his mother shrink in her loving anxiety, had she been alive to see it. "I cannot confront them; they will both know I am kept at

a safe distance, and that even when I am free to return, I shall not dare to trust myself near enough to be troublesome ; ” and there was a feeling in the passionate, jealous heart which made him not dare to think of Louis Wilmot, not to dwell on the thought of him who had stolen from him the treasure of his life, who *might*, but for him, have gone on being such to the end.

The thought brought something too like madness into his heart. He did not write to Eleanor ; she would not require to be thanked for the service she had done him ; she would know soon enough what had come of it.

When at last Norman left his room, none would have guessed that his heart had just received a wound which could never heal, than which no greater could ever come to him—none could have suspected the depth of bitter pain which had dictated that stern, merciless letter which he carried so quietly in his hand.

“ And now to forget her,” was the bitter resolution, uttered as he made his way back to Mrs. Lacy’s room. But a small voice whispered in his soul, faintly as yet, that

he resolved what was impossible. Could a love such as his had been, be so soon laid aside, even by the aid of all the haughty determination he would bring to bear? Must not the wound rankle, fresh and unforgotten, in his heart until his dying day?

CHAPTER III.

“HERE’s your letter, Violet,” and Eleanor handed her one which had just been brought in as they were sitting down to breakfast alone, for Mrs. Mortimer had been obliged to keep her bed for the last day or two. Violet had been expecting to hear from Norman to-day, and proceeded at once to open his letter, though she always read his letters many a time over alone in her own room. Eleanor was seemingly busy with her breakfast, and Violet could not perceive that she was watching her somewhat nervously as she broke the seal of her letter. Scarcely had Violet glanced at the first line, than she started up with a look of total bewilderment, trembling so as to be obliged to grasp the chair from which she had risen. Then she read on, and Eleanor never took her eyes from her face.

“May God forgive you, Violet Mortimer,” ran Norman’s letter, “for your shameful

deception, for the wrong you have inflicted on one who loved you as you never deserved, as you never can even have understood. I thought you truth itself, and every time you have told me, latterly, at least, that you loved me you told me a lie. And you could have gone on deceiving me even yet, because you dreaded the exposure and the confession which I now spare you the trouble of making. It suffices to tell you that I know all, by a proof which has fallen into my hands, without which no power on earth should have made me believe you false. Even now I cannot realize it, when I think of all the past and how we parted. I do not know how long I may have been your dupe, but I am so no longer; henceforth you are nothing to me, and I must be, already, less than nothing to you. You were afraid, it seems, to acquaint me with the truth. Should you not rather have been afraid to carry on such a course of deception, more cruel to me even than that other of which I was the victim long ago, because my love for you was so much stronger than that other love, so entirely a part of myself, as you have let me tell you many a time. All through your future life (and I

cannot think it will be a happy one, with a nature so pitifully weak as yours has proved) you may carry with you the knowledge, though it will, of course, be indifferent to you, that you have destroyed the happiness of mine. If we could never meet again, it would be best for both. It is well (as doubtless you and not only you are aware) that I am kept so far away, that I cannot confront you. For me it is well, for I might be tempted to reproach you in words so hard as I should be afterwards sorry to have used to one who was so loved as you were by my mother. For her sake you have my forgiveness, Violet Mortimer, though it may be that you will care little for it. In the past I ought to have seen how it was; I am punished now for my blindness and too great trust. It must be that I was destined never to win a woman's true love. Others, better than I, have lived without it, and though my dream of happiness seemed so near realization, I too must lay it aside and learn to exist without it.

“NORMAN ASHLEIGH.”

Violet's breath came quick and short, and even Eleanor was frightened at the strange,

bewildered look which came over her face as she read Norman's letter, straight on to the last word. Then a low moan, which Eleanor never forgot, agonizing in its hopelessness, burst from Violet, as, with the letter still in her trembling hand, she turned away and fell on her knees by the chair, burying her face on her arms as she leant upon it. She seemed to have forgotten Eleanor's presence, and knelt there very still and quiet during those first few moments of acute, despairing suffering. Eleanor was very pale as she rose at last and approached Violet.

"Violet, what is it? You frighten me. Is Mr. Ashleigh ill?" she asked, in a low voice.

Eleanor's speaking to her reminded Violet that she was not alone.

"Oh, no! Oh, Eleanor, don't speak to me!" she moaned, without looking up.

"Violet, you must be ill; do tell me what is the matter," and there was real alarm in Eleanor's voice now, as she laid her hand on Violet's shoulder.

Then, hardly knowing what she was doing, perhaps to be relieved of Eleanor's importunity, Violet raised herself slightly, and

without a word handed her Norman's letter. If anyone had been by, they must have noticed how eagerly Eleanor received the crumpled letter, and that a peculiar, hard look was in her eyes as she read the bitter words, the stern accusations which were tearing Violet's heart at this moment until it felt like to break.

“Violet! how *could* he write such a letter? Never even to name what it is of which he accuses you!” exclaimed Eleanor indignantly, as she turned again towards Violet.

But the latter, roused to a sense of her situation by Eleanor's words, rose quickly, her face burning and her eyes bright with a strange fire. Taking the letter from Eleanor's hands, she left the room, and Eleanor followed her.

“Violet, you must take some breakfast, you will be ill if you don't,” and she tried to detain her, but the trembling figure freed itself from her grasp.

“Eleanor, do not follow me; let me be alone,” and Violet went quickly upstairs and shut herself in her room.

Then she forced herself to read Norman's letter again, each cruel word sinking like

a knife into her sensitive heart. She was wholly at a loss to understand even what he *could* refer to, who and what could have so injured her with him. Only the one agonizing thought burned in her bewildered brain. Norman had believed some calumny against her, had believed it and cast her off, without even telling her of what he accused her ! Norman had done this ! And but yesterday she would have laughed, in her happy trust, at anyone who had hinted that such a thing was possible. He was proud, quick perhaps to suspect where he loved, but until now, she had not dreamed he could believe her false, without hearing it from herself, or on evidence so slight and untrustworthy as he must have accepted as proof. The proud, sensitive nature gave way at last, the wronged, loving heart could bear up no longer under the blow that had fallen, and sitting down by the bed, she buried her face upon it, her slight frame convulsed with the heartrending sobs which escaped her.

“ Oh, Norman ! ” was the wail in her heart ; “ you believe me false, that I have deceived you, and you could write that letter, accusing me of having lied to you ! ”

What could it all mean? Who could have so influenced Norman as to make him condemn her unheard—her whom he had so loved, his “little Violet”? There had been such *perfect* trust between them; had not the very last letters they exchanged been as usual, as each loved to receive from the other?

It was impossible that the thought of Mr. Wilmot should not occur to Violet’s mind at this moment; but how could he be the one to injure her? Would Norman be likely to believe anything for a moment which he, their evil genius, as it were, could say or do to injure her? And yet there was not one other who would not be glad to see her Norman’s wife. It was all a mystery, which her bewildered mind could not attempt to penetrate. In the happy days before Mrs. Ashleigh’s death, well might a fear cross her mind of some sorrow coming, a dread as of some unknown evil, but never, never had she dreamt of this. Was it all over then, her life’s happiness? Norman had cast her off, Norman Ashleigh, who was all the world to her, whom she loved perhaps too much, who had been master of her heart

before she was conscious of it ! He had cast her off, believing her false ! And she would never hear him call her his “little Violet” again, never walk by his side any more in the dear gardens of Ashleigh Court ; she would *never* be his wife ; and Violet shuddered, wondering how she would live through the desolate future. And he himself too, how he must be suffering, how strong must have been the provocation that could make him write those cruel, bitter words, he who would so lately have died rather than knowingly cause her a moment’s pain ! It may have been this thought of Norman’s suffering which caused her to start up as the idea came across her.

“Ought I not to let him know that he has been deceived, that it is either some sad mistake, or some one who wishes to injure me, or both of us, that has brought about all this ? Ought I not, at least, to insist on knowing of what he accuses me ? For my own sake, I must do so, and for *his* and mine, I must let him know how he has been deceived, how never for an instant have I had a thought he might not have known. Whatever proof he has ac-

cepted will be as nothing to my own words, oh, surely not ! Oh, Norman ! if anyone had tried to make me believe anything against *you*, *nothing* but your own word should have made me believe it for an instant ! ”

It would be a hard task, terribly hard for her proud spirit, Violet knew, to force herself to write the intended letter to Norman, who had believed her false and cast her off, telling her she was henceforth nothing to him ; but was not a little humiliation now better than a life’s misery and misunderstanding ?

Norman had been so cruelly deceived before, as he had told her, and his naturally proud temper had been rendered more prone to suspicion than he would otherwise have been. Would not her reward be Norman’s thanks, and his embrace so yearned for, on his return ? And the picture grew so bright that it seemed to cheer away the chilly desolation which had been upon her from the moment she had read the first line of Norman’s letter. At this moment, how Violet longed for “ dear grand-mamma,” for that sweet, kindly face which would smile on her no more. Never since her death had the desire been so strong that she could lay her head on Mrs. Ashleigh’s breast

once more and hear the loved voice speaking to her with a mother's affection. If *she* had lived, all this could never have happened ; safe with her dear protectress, who would have dared to calumniate her to Norman ?

For now, even if her life's happiness were restored, if she were yet Norman's wife, must not the pain ever remain, or come to her at times at least, of knowing that on but slight evidence he had believed her false, that he had believed her capable of a course of deception ? Even though she fully forgave him, and were wholly happy again in his love and tenderness, must not the pain be felt at times, hard as she might try to forget it ?

Just at this point there was a tap at Violet's door, and Eleanor's voice asked, " May I come in, Violet ? " reminding the latter of what she had almost forgotten, that Eleanor had read Norman's letter and had expressed indignation at it, and that she was come now perhaps to offer commiseration from which Violet shrank in her proud sensitiveness. Only to one or two could Violet have spoken now without rendering her pain greater, only from them would sympathy, openly expressed, have been grateful. But Eleanor doubtless meant it for

the best, for she had been very kind lately, so much so as to cause Violet to think that she no longer disliked her presence, that she did not wish for her marriage only in order to be rid of her. So Eleanor entered, and placing her hand affectionately on Violet's arm as she sat down beside her, she said with much gentleness,—

“Violet, I wish I could do anything for you. I have said nothing to mamma, of course, but she asked if you had had a letter. What can it mean? If you have any idea, Violet, what can have caused this mistake, and if I can do anything for you, your confidence will not be misplaced. Let it serve to—efface the past between us,” and Eleanor looked so earnest, so desirous that they should be real friends, that Violet was overcome, for in her terrible bewilderment and loneliness, it was, after all, soothing to hear a kind word, a promise of help and sympathy. And why should she keep her resolve a secret from Eleanor, who knew so much already. And so it came about, that Eleanor, of all others, became Violet's confidante on this occasion, when her whole life's happiness was at stake.

“Eleanor,” and Violet's voice trembled,

“I shall write to him. My own word must be more to him than any fancied proof. I must do so, for both our sakes, however painful it may be at first to my pride. It is impossible,” she added passionately, “that the happiness of our whole lives should be destroyed like this, by some wicked calumny, for I *do not* know what else it can be.”

For an instant Eleanor turned away to hide the perplexed frown upon her forehead, and there was a hard, cold expression in her blue eyes, as they were hidden from Violet’s view. But she soon recovered her composure and said earnestly,—

“I am so glad, Violet. That is exactly what I wanted to say, just what I was going to beg of you to do, though I know it will be painful at first, as you say. Violet, Mr. Ashleigh’s letter made my blood boil. I should never have borne it half so patiently as you are doing. I am afraid you will remind me that I don’t know Mr. Ashleigh, that I always thought him haughty and unreasonable; but indeed, Violet, I was beginning to really like him, lately. Will you take my advice and write your letter now, at once, for you feel it to be right to do it, and delay might only make

it more painful and difficult? There is plenty of time of course, but you will feel happier when once it is written and sent safe out of your reach. And there is no need, Violet, for anyone to know that anything has been amiss between you and Mr. Ashleigh. Except of course mamma; she may suspect something; but in her state, she will not be in a mood to question you much, and all will be right before she can think it any more than your natural anxiety for Mr. Ashleigh's return."

How thankfully did Violet take in Eleanor's words, which sounded so fair and easy! And she knew Eleanor was right in advising her to write her letter to Norman at once, for she felt that if she let too much time pass in thinking about it, her pride might prove too strong for her, suggesting perhaps that he who could so easily believe her false, could not love her so strongly, or that he might despise her for condescending to justify herself and demand an explanation after so stern and decisive a letter as he had written to her. These ideas had already grown so strong that Violet shrank from them tremblingly.

"Eleanor," she said, "I will write it now, at once."

And thus it came about quite naturally that the only one near in whom to confide in this her sore trouble was Eleanor, while Mrs. Arnott and Nelly would have to be content with but short, reticent letters during the coming days of trembling suspense. Eleanor now left the room for a few minutes, and Violet sat down at once to her desk and began to write, her hand trembling so as hardly to be able to hold the pen.

“ You have believed me false, Norman,” she wrote in trembling characters, “ you accuse me of deception in words which must have broken my heart, did I not know it could have only been very cruel suffering which forced you to write them. You will know how painful it is to write in this way to you, after your letter telling me that all is over between us. For your sake more than to defend myself (for the latter reason only should never induce me to write as I now do, if I believed you had ceased to love me) I tell you, Norman, that I have never for an instant been faithless, never have had a thought you might not have known. Oh! Norman, how could any evidence weigh against the letters I have written to you, against my own words

I am bewildered, at a loss to think what you can have heard, and you do not even tell me what it is! At least you cannot refuse to do this. I do not know who or what can have injured me so as to make you believe me capable of a lie, and such a one as you accuse me of! Ever since I gave you my heart, Norman, my thoughts have been all of you,—perhaps too much so,—of you and the happiness you gave me, and yet you have been made to believe that when I have looked into your face and told you I loved you, I have told you a lie! After all the past, Norman, what *can* have so cruelly deceived you?

“VIOLET MORTIMER.”

She could not sign herself his “own Violet” in the endearing terms she had been used to do; she might not do so again until he had once more given her the right. She had written quickly and passionately, not perhaps as she could have wished, but just putting down the words as they came from her wounded heart. Then, as she folded the letter, pride and love again strove for the mastery. What if her appeal were powerless, if her

words were useless? But the thought was like madness; it was impossible, and love gained the mastery.

Eleanor came into the room again as Violet was sealing her letter. She stood near without speaking while she addressed it to Norman, and there was a strange eagerness in her cold eyes as she watched Violet write.

"You will be happier now that it is written," she said. "Mamma has been asking for you, and I promised to send you to her. I am going to Oxford Street, Violet, and you must let me post your letter at once while I am out. You will not be out this morning, and the longer you keep that letter in your possession, the harder it will be to send it. Let it go at once out of your reach, and you will see I am right; you will feel quieter and more settled."

How kind Eleanor was! though of course this was a case in which one could not refuse sympathy, even to a stranger, and the posting of a letter was but little. Yet, from Eleanor, any little attention seemed worth more, because it had not been habitual.

Again Eleanor left the room, returning in

a few minutes equipped to go out, and as she took the letter from Violet's hand, the latter hesitated still.

“Oh, Norman ! will it bring you back to me !” was the cry in her heart. But Eleanor gently took possession of the letter and turned to leave the room,

“Thank you, Eleanor,” Violet called out softly as the door closed.

The letter was gone now, and Violet tried to calm her beating heart as she went to sit with Mrs. Mortimer, as she usually did during the morning.

“You look pale and tired, my dear,” was her stepmother's greeting to-day. “Norman Ashleigh would tell me I don't make you go out often enough. You've had a letter to-day ? How is he and poor Mrs. Lacy ? No change in her, I suppose ? ”

“I think not mamma ; he does not name her,” was the reply, for Violet's truthful nature scorned to pretend that nothing at all was amiss, to one in daily intercourse with her. “Mamma,” she added suddenly, and very earnestly, “will you promise not to ask me any more about Norman until his next letter comes ? Don't be uneasy ; it is only a

temporary silence, and the need for it will have passed away when I hear from him again."

Mrs. Mortimer was naturally surprised, but Violet, now that the first terrible shock was past, had become so imbued with the conviction that all would yet be cleared up, that it was not possible her own and Norman's happiness could be destroyed or even long interrupted by *anything* but death, that she succeeded in impressing her stepmother with the idea that it was only some secret with Norman, something perhaps about his return home, or some improvement in his aunt's health, which Violet was not to tell of until he wrote again to confirm it.

And so Violet was unmolested by Mrs. Mortimer's questions or suspicions during those anxious days after her letter was gone to Norman.

Mr. Wilmot called as usual, but there was something so intolerable in his presence —more than ever now, because Violet could not but feel that in some way or other he was to blame, or at least was partly the cause of her present pain—that she always contrived to avoid seeing him or to leave the room soon after his entrance.

Thus, when Mrs. Mortimer was unwell, Louis Wilmot and Eleanor were nearly always left to entertain one another alone, as best they could. Oh! how wearily, maddening in their length, did those days of waiting pass for Violet!

Waiting tremblingly, longing for Norman's letter, the letter that *must* come, or——. But she dared not think, except with certain hope.

“How he will reproach himself, poor Norman, when he gets my letter! how sorry he will be for his ‘little Violet’!” and there would come a yearning, far-off look in her eyes, which showed the longing in her heart.

It was only at times, oftenest at night when Violet lay awake, that the words of Norman's letter, so sternly decisive, so cruelly showing his conviction of her falsehood, would come again with all their first force into her mind, and she would weep shudderingly at the vision of the desolation that might be hers; but still hope *would* return, sweet in its trusting certainty. And outwardly Violet had to appear cheerful, or at least undisturbed, especially before Mrs. Mortimer, and her old

habits of self-control stood her in good stead now.

Between Eleanor and herself Violet's trouble was not openly referred to ; Violet showed Eleanor silently her thankfulness for her sympathy and advice ; but her proud heart could not bear that its wound should be spoken of until healed and joyfully obliterated. During this interval Violet received letters from both Mrs. Arnott and Nelly, but she did not answer them ; how could she, without naming him who had all her thoughts ?

“ They must be content to wonder at my unusual silence ! ” she sighed. “ How can I write, even to Mrs. Arnott ? Oh ! if I had been with her, would all this have happened ! ”

Even in her absorbing preoccupation and care, Violet could hardly help a smile at the thought of what would have been warm-hearted, independent Nelly's indignation, could she have known the reason of her silence at this time.

CHAPTER IV.

THE day came at last when Violet expected Norman's answer to her letter. She was sitting at breakfast as usual with her step-mother and Eleanor when the post arrived, Eleanor alone perceiving the signs of Violet's inner agitation, so hard to conceal.

"You will hear to-day from Norman Ashleigh, of course, Violet," said Mrs. Mortimer ; "he has not written since last mail but one. I suppose you will announce Mrs. Lacy's improvement, and his coming home, or something else important to-day, my love," and she smiled blandly.

Violet tried to smile in answer and to hide her terrible agitation as Eleanor went to the door to take the letters from the servant.

No, there was not one for Violet ; one or two for Mrs. Mortimer and Eleanor, but none for her who had looked so eagerly, with the certainty of one whose life's happiness is at stake, for the letter which had not come.

“ The mail must be late, there will be one to-morrow,” said Mrs. Mortimer, as she opened her own letters.

Eleanor glanced sideways at Violet, who sat very quiet, engaged, as it seemed, with her breakfast.

“ Yes, it will come to-morrow,” she was thinking ; “ another weary day to wait ; ” but underneath the certain hope, the trusting faith which would not be relinquished, there were whisperings of a terrible fear, “ What if I have hoped in vain ! ” a fear which froze her heart, making her wonder how she would bear the suspense even of a day. And so a few hours passed on, until, later in the day, the blow came. A parcel arrived for Violet from Alexandria, addressed to her in Norman’s handwriting. She was alone in her room when it was brought to her, and she began at once to open it with trembling hands. It proved to be a box, containing——what ? No letter from Norman, but all the letters *he* had ever received from *her*, and all the little presents she had given him, which he had taken away with him to Alexandria.

Never, all through her life, did Violet forget the moment that she first perceived what

were the contents of the parcel. She stood motionless, crushed by the weight of conflicting emotions. Despairing love, hopeless bewilderment, outraged trust, and the indignant pride of a sensitive heart, all the best feelings of her nature wounded and quivering under the blow, were all raging with terrible violence in Violet's stricken soul as she gazed wildly at the box as it lay open before her. Norman had scorned to answer her appeal, disbelieving even her own assertion that she was ignorant of what he charged her with, deeming it sufficient reply to send back her letters and whatever else she had ever given him. In her bewilderment, she was just able to think sufficiently to wonder why he had not sent them before, sooner after his letter, and to feel that her letter of defence had roused him to the painful exertion of ridding himself of these tokens, which were now to him only evidences of falsehood.

For a few minutes Violet stood there quite motionless under this last blow. Oh! the agony of those minutes, which seemed like hours to the injured heart! She had laid aside her pride, making it bend before her trusting love and faith, and this was her

reward, these silent evidences of disbelieving scorn, worse a hundred times than the bitterest reproaches.

Then, like one in a dream, Violet mechanically took up the letters. Yes, they were all there, from the short, shy note she had written to Norman when he was in India to thank him for his present on her seventeenth birthday, to the later ones written in the sweet certainty of being loved. She had looked at but a few when a slip of paper fell from the package, containing these words,—

“The last was burnt immediately after perusal.”

These few curt words in Norman’s handwriting sent a quiver through Violet’s whole frame. Yes, he had burnt that last letter, in his scorn and indignation and utter disbelief in its assertions! Violet looked at no more of the letters, but gathered them up together again and put the package in her pocket. One by one she then took out the remaining contents of the box, each bringing its own recollection of happiness gone for ever, the sight of each in turn tearing her throbbing heart afresh. There was a little drawing she had executed, of one of her

favourite spots among the hills near Ashleigh Court, and which Norman had playfully stolen from her when it was barely finished, a short time before Mrs. Ashleigh's death. Here it was now, held within her hand again, and the last time she had seen it had been when Norman laughingly took it with his stronger grasp, from her resisting hands. And there was the little purse she had given to him, worked by herself, which he had said was far too pretty to be used, but which he *would* use, he had added, because "little Violet" had given it him. And so on with all the other things, of greater or lesser value, until she came to the last little offering, then replacing them all in the box, she put it hastily into a drawer which she never used, and locked them up out of her sight. Then at last she left her bedroom and went down to the sitting-room, where even in summer a fire was kept for Mrs. Mortimer, but which Violet knew was just at present unoccupied. She entered, shut the door, and taking the package of letters from her pocket, threw them on the blaze, and stood with tightly clasped hands, watching the destruction of what had once been to Norman his most precious treasures,

the outpourings of her love and confidence, now sent back to her in indignant contempt, as things only reminding him of her faithlessness. She watched them till the fire had entirely consumed them, until no vestige of them remained. They were destroyed, like the hope and joy of her life, which was gone, utterly and for ever. She turned to leave the room, and then suddenly stopped as there rushed over her afresh the thought of the future, the thought of the weary, desolate blank which was opening for her, and she pressed her hands to her forehead as if in pain. Her dream of hope and trust in Norman's love and confidence had been dispelled in the most cruel manner; for though she had known him to be haughty, quick to be jealous perhaps, too, more so because of the deception practised on him long ago, yet she had not believed it had made him hard and stern like this, so that when once he had accepted what he deemed sufficient proof of her falsehood, he could refuse to believe her own earnest appeal, her own written assertion of her constancy and love.

Oh! why had she let her love master her pride, only to meet with insult so bitter! And for the first time in her life the spirit of

unforgiveness seemed to take possession of Violet's heart, and she was unable to cope with it. It seemed to her as though, if even in the future Norman should ever be convinced how grievously he had been mistaken, and that she was wholly innocent of whatever act or conduct he had accused her of, still she could never forgive him, her proud spirit could never sufficiently forget the wound he had now inflicted. It was a terrible feeling, terribly new and strange to the generous heart, freezing the very life within it, and yet Violet knew it was there, while yet shrinking from the knowledge. And her friends would pity her on knowing that Norman had forsaken her, that all was over between them. How would she bear their commiseration, kind though it would be, and though she might keep them in ignorance of the exact circumstances of her trouble ? Would it not be well if she could die, now, in this moment of bitter awakening ? But the weary spirit fought against the impious thought, born of its mad agony. And no tears came to Violet's eyes, no kind sobs such as had relieved her on the day that the first blow fell, and while hope still remained. No,

not even when she remembered the task she had yet to perform, the sending back of Norman's letters and love tokens, the treasures she had kept so carefully, so jealously guarded. She had no power to weep, and her eyes were dry and strangely fixed as she left the room and went straight to the adjoining one where Mrs. Mortimer and Eleanor sat together. She went up at once to the former and stood beside her.

"Mamma," and even Eleanor started at the hollow tone, "you must never name Norman Ashleigh to me again. It is all over between us; I am nothing to him now, we are nothing to *each other* now."

Was it the sight of her as she stood there, so quiet and tearless, that made Eleanor turn away as though to look at her were painful? Mrs. Mortimer started violently.

"Violet, my dear! I don't understand. What is the matter with you? You frighten me. You had a letter, hadn't you, from Alexandria?"

"Not a letter, mamma, a parcel, with my own letters and—and the other things. He had to send them back—you know," and Violet looked at Eleanor as though her words were addressed to her also.

“Do you mean to say he has deserted you, cast you off, Violet? What does it mean? I shall write to him myself for an explanation, if you do not!” and Mrs. Mortimer spoke eagerly and excitedly.

“Mamma! you *must* not! *Promise* me that you will not! It is not as you think; you must not think—the worst of him. It is useless to tell you any more; I cannot. But it is all over between us, and you must promise not to name him or the past to me any more.”

Curiosity was strongly at work in Mrs. Mortimer’s heart; but she knew it would be useless to question further, that she must be content to remain in wonder as to what had occurred. What could it be after an attachment such as had been Violet’s and Norman Ashleigh’s? Knowing each other as they did, so long and so well, what *could* it be! Mrs. Mortimer had never really intended to write to Norman; she could never have mustered sufficient firmness to write a letter of questioning reproach to one like him, who would so haughtily resent her weak interference. But there was genuine pity in her heart for the young girl she was

growing to love so tardily with a tenderness more holy than any her weak nature had yet known.

“My poor Violet! I will promise you. Do not be uneasy, I will not interfere. I will never name the past to you again, and Eleanor must promise the same.”

“Violet understood that, mamma, of course,” said Eleanor, somewhat impatiently.

“I shall stay with you always now, mamma, you know,” and Violet’s little hand rested on her stepmother’s arm caressingly.

But Eleanor saw the slight quiver that passed over Violet’s lips, though she spoke so quietly. Until now Eleanor had never known how strong and deep, how proud was Violet’s sensitive nature, and it may be that there was something of admiration in her cold eyes as she fixed them on the young face so tearless in its agony.

“But, my love, it will all come right again, perhaps. It must, when he comes home.”

“No, mamma, never. It is impossible,” and the words came quickly and decisively from Violet’s lips as a shudder ran through her frame. A moment later she left, and Eleanor followed her.

“Violet,” and she tried in vain to speak calmly, “is it all over, then? He disbelieved your words, your own letter? Was there no letter from him?”

“No; if there had been a letter I should have had it this morning by post. Eleanor, I may tell you because you know all. There were a few words written, saying that my last letter was burnt as soon as read; all the rest were sent back with the other things. Now that I have told you this, we need not speak of it again, Eleanor; there is nothing more to tell. He has disbelieved me, refusing even to write and tell me so, and—it is all over.”

Only the voice of painful effort betrayed the proud heart’s agony as Violet spoke these words of bitter acknowledgment.

Eleanor pressed Violet’s hand for a moment, and then turned away her face, with a strange glitter in her eyes and a smile of triumph on her lips.

All through that weary evening Violet sat still and tearless, bearing silently the weight of her blow, the pain of her never-to-be-healed wound. Something in her aspect forbade Mrs. Mortimer to attempt to ask

any explanation or to offer any consolation or hope.

“How does she bear it so quietly—is it her own doing, or what can it be?” was the question she asked herself a hundred times that evening as Violet moved about as usual, somewhat wearily perhaps, with a painful look in her brown eyes and a tighter compression of the lips, but nothing else to excite observation, no other change from her ordinary demeanour. But she spoke little and retired early.

“I am rather tired, mamma,” she said, “I will go to bed ;” and she kissed Mrs. Mortimer and Eleanor perhaps more lingeringly than usual before she left the room.

“How very quietly Violet takes it,” and Mrs. Mortimer turned to Eleanor. “I cannot understand it at all, after an attachment like hers was to Norman Ashleigh. And evidently she will never enlighten us any more as to what has occurred between them. It can only be what has passed in their letters. But she is so very quiet and calm.”

“Very,” said Eleanor coldly. Unlike her mother, she understood that Violet was suffering a grief too cruel for tears, too deep for outward display.

Mrs. Mortimer, even in her real sorrow for Violet, was sensible of keen vexation at the loss of a son-in-law so rich and so very attractive as Norman Ashleigh, though the loss was to her an earnest that she would have Violet always with her now.

“First you,” she said fretfully to Eleanor, “and now Violet. But you deserved it all, Eleanor, for your conduct to Mr. Bently; he could do nothing else but break off his engagement with you. But in Violet’s case I cannot help feeling certain she is not to blame. Norman Ashleigh was unreasonable, I’m sure, and I always fancied he could be desperately jealous if ever the occasion came.”

Eleanor was probably used to her mother’s reproaches by this time, for she deigned no reply, but smiled scornfully to herself without raising her eyes from her work.

Meanwhile, alone upstairs Violet sat by her bed, knowing that its rest and promise of tranquil sleep were not for her to-night. Rest could not come yet to the heart that was throbbing so fiercely underneath the quiet exterior. Oh! why had she ever tasted such happiness as hers had been? better that she had never seen Ashleigh Court, better that

she had gone on in her lonely, unloved existence here at home, better a thousand times than this! And yet amidst the knowledge that she could never forgive him who had injured her beyond the limits of endurance, who had offered such an insult to her womanly pride, she knew that she loved him still, that if she should live for years, she would do so all the same, and this knowledge was galling in its humiliation.

Norman had said he should forget her and learn to live without her love ; could *she* say so of *him*? No, no, alas for her own peace, she could not. Even now she longed to hear his voice again, to meet his tender gaze, to feel her hand in his, and she never would again as in the past, never again! She would never listen to him again as he played on the old piano at Ashleigh Court ; he would never again ask her to sing and listen to her with pleasure, never again ; and the words seemed to sound and ring in her ears like a mournful knell. And she knew that, deep as was the wound he had inflicted on her pride, it was the pain and the loss of his love and esteem which caused the still deeper agony, the agony which must last through life.

And yet she told herself that she could never forgive him, never sufficiently to let it be again as it had been. Even if (which could never come to pass when he had disbelieved her word) he discovered his grievous error, and implored her forgiveness, it seemed to her that she could never grant it, not fully, as he would ask it. If he had once believed her false against her own testimony, how could she ever feel certain of his confidence again? And why had all this come to pass? Because some one had calumniated her to Norman, or some fatal mistake had been sufficient to convince him against her. Oh! who or what was it that had so blasted her life's happiness! And again the thought of Louis Wilmot, the only possible enemy she or Norman had to their knowledge, rose in her mind. Who else could have injured her? And yet, how could Norman be for an instant influenced by *him*!

If it was anything else, any deeply laid scheme of Louis Wilmot's, and not merely his simple assertion, then God help her, for she was powerless now when Norman had rejected her own appeal, her own assertion of her constancy, which ought to have been all-potent with him.

“ Oh ! if grandmamma could have foreseen this it would have broken her heart,” was Violet’s thought in her desolation. “ Oh ! well might I fear I was too happy, too certain of Norman’s love.”

And he too, he must be suffering, how much she would never know, so convinced as he must be of her falsehood. Doubly great must be his suffering, she felt, because of the deception of which he had long since been the victim and about which he had so fully and freely confided to her, telling her how much greater was his love for her than that first youthful passion.

It was the consideration of Norman’s sorrow, his terrible pain, that could alone bring the tears at last to Violet’s eyes. Slowly they fell, bitter, burning tears, wrung from her very heart by the thought of Norman’s pain. And she might not console him ; he had cast her off, and so lately she had hoped with such a certain hope to be his wife, to be cherished by his strong, protecting tenderness through life ! He had been all her world, and now from henceforth they must be as strangers !

The next morning after her night of

weary, desolate wakefulness, Violet received a letter from Mrs. Arnott, enquiring first and anxiously if she were ill, as she feared from her not answering her last letter. Then, with undisguised concern, she went on to ask if Violet had heard from Norman by this mail the news of Mrs. Lacy's death. Mrs. Brownson had just been to her, bringing a letter she had that morning received from her young master, announcing his aunt's death, which had taken place two days previous to his writing his letter. But what she was unable to understand was that he did not state any time for his return home. After his aunt's funeral, he should still remain abroad, he wrote, adding that Mrs. Brownson must not expect him home for an indefinite time.

“Circumstances,” he added, “have occurred of which you will doubtless shortly be aware, which render my return no longer expedient.”

No other explanation had been given, and Norman had concluded by stating that he was writing a few directions to his steward by this mail.

Mrs. Arnott went on to say that she was writing, immediately on Mrs. Brownson's leaving her, to know what could have taken place to determine Norman to remain abroad.

“ Surely, my dear Violet, nothing can be wrong ; he would not let any unpleasantness with Mrs. Mortimer influence him ; and yet I dread your answer, not having heard from you for three weeks. Mrs. Brownson is as uneasy as myself ; it seems so unaccountable. Do write to tell me all is right.”

Violet had suspected this, that Norman would remain from home even after his aunt’s death. As briefly as she could, she told Mrs. Arnott’s news to Mrs. Mortimer and Eleanor, and the latter, on reading the day’s newspaper, found in it the notice of Mrs. Lacy’s death, which must of course have been sent by Norman for publication.

Later in the day Violet sat down to write to Mrs. Arnott. What could she say ? How could she tell this dear friend of the wreck of her life’s happiness ? Tell her all she knew, in full, Violet felt she *could* not. Later, when they met again, perhaps it might be easier, but to write it now was impossible ; and it would be better perhaps if Mrs. Arnott never knew all that had passed. It would do no good, and only cause her useless pain. So she merely wrote,—

“ It is all over between me and Norman ;

we are nothing to each other now. If we ever meet again it will be only as strangers. This will perhaps explain his remaining abroad ; I know of no other reason. I have had no letter *this* mail, only a parcel sending back my letters and the other things. Do not think me unkind, *dear* Mrs. Arnott, because I do not tell you more. Indeed I *cannot*, and it would only be useless. Some future time I may tell you all I know ; but you will understand how hard it is even to tell you this. Do not think too hardly of him, do not blame him because he has inflicted on me a wound which I know will never heal. He too must be suffering deeply, though yet I cannot tell you why, for you know better than anyone how he *did* love me. Why should I say any more ? it is all over, and I can *never* be anything to him again, or he to me. I myself can never wish it now. Do not be uneasy about me ; I am quite well, and mamma and Eleanor are very kind. Give my love to dear Mrs. Brownson, and tell her not to be unhappy ; " and with a few more words Violet concluded, telling no more of her pain, even to Mrs. Arnott, almost the dearest friend she had left now.

She wrote also to Nelly Woodford, for her cruel sorrow must be told, so as well now as later.

She performed her task in almost the same words she had written to Mrs. Arnott, begging her to forgive what might seem want of confidence,—

“ But you know it is not that, Nelly, darling, so you will not ask me to tell you any more, not yet, only pray for me—oh ! do Nelly, for my thoughts are too much for me at times ! And you know I will always pray that your life may not be such as mine must always be now. Oh, Nelly ! I am only eighteen, and my life’s happiness is over, and the future looks so long and dreary ! ” and the plaint came from the depths of her lonely heart as she wrote the words to Nelly Woodford.

But another task yet remained, harder a hundred times than writing her cruel news to her friends. That same day Violet gathered together those precious treasures, so fondly loved for the donor’s sake, the presents Norman had given her, taking also from their place in her desk his letters, which had been so lately her comfort and companions during

his absence. It did Violet good perhaps, performing her cruel task, for it brought the tears up from her breaking heart, and they fell afresh at each remembrance recalled by the things her trembling hands were putting together.

She had looked her last at the letters, pressing them unconsciously to her lips and blushing painfully afterwards at her weakness, and then she stopped in her task, as though unable to go on. But pride nerved her to proceed, and soon the last of Norman's gifts was laid in the box and hidden from her eyes. She tried to write very firmly as she addressed the parcel to Norman at Alexandria. "It is the last time I shall ever address anything to him," she said to herself, and she seemed now to have severed herself finally from the past, with its tender joys and bright happiness.

"How little I thought that last evening, when we left Ashleigh Court together, that he would never open the garden gate for me again! Poor little Charley is not mine now; I shall never ride him by Norman's side again among the hills! Oh, Norman! how could you be so cruel to your Violet, who must *always* love you, in spite of all! But he

shall never know it ; he shall never know that my heart is breaking for him, never ! " she exclaimed passionately to herself, " I could *never* trust his love again. After all his tenderness, so endearing, so devoted, he can be so hard and stern ! " and burying her face in her hands, Violet sobbed out her pain at last, freely, without restraint, weeping so as to have cut Norman to the heart, could he but have seen her, instead of being, as he was, so far away from her who had so lately been his darling, his " little Violet. "

Violet's letters came as thunderclaps to Mrs. Arnott and Nelly Woodford. The latter's indignation against Norman was deep and violent, for she felt convinced it was his unreasonable haughtiness that was in fault. And there was nothing to be done ; he was remaining abroad, and Violet had been his only regular correspondent in England.

" Oh, papa ! " she said to her father, " if only you or Harry had been in the habit of writing to him, you might have done some good ; but to interfere as it is, with one like him, would be impossible. And Violet leaves me so in the dark, poor darling ! Why did she not tell me more ? Though indeed I can

hardly wonder at her for not doing so. She writes so strangely, as though it were not *all* his doing, as though he were injured as well as she. But she is so generous, she would be sure to try to make it appear so. What can it be! We can do nothing, and her life will be so dreary and wretched! Oh! papa, I shall never fall in love and want to leave you; what has love done for Violet?" and Nelly laid her pretty face on her father's shoulder to hide the tears which were flowing fast.

And Mrs. Arnott and Mrs. Brownson too were at first unable to realise the fact that all was over between Norman and Violet. It was all so bewildering, Violet told so little in her painful letter, and nothing could be done. Norman was not coming home, and neither he nor Violet would be likely to brook any interference, however kind. The idea that one had proved false to the other could never occur for an instant to those who knew them well, and Violet had just mentioned in her letter that Mrs. Mortimer had *nothing* to do with it, but was as ignorant as themselves of what had occurred. No, it must be, unlikely as it appeared, some fatal mistake, or some disagreement which had arisen in their

letters, mayhap concerning something which had occurred before Norman went away ; and they were both so proud, each would be unlikely to be the first to yield. And yet how incredible it seemed that any dispute so grave could have arisen between two possessing such perfect trust and mutual confidence !

“ Oh ! if Norman would only come home ! ” was Mrs. Arnott’s one thought.

And yet when she hinted this very kindly and delicately to Violet in her next letter, it only brought the painful answer,—

“ Better that he should not, for there is that now which would make it impossible for me ever to wish for a renewal of the old tie between us, even if he could ever ask for it, which, knowing what I do, I feel is a thing *impossible*. ”

From both Mrs. Arnott and Nelly Violet received earnest invitations to visit them, if she could possibly do so, for both felt uneasy for her, if only from her very quiet, uncomplaining letters, which must, they knew, be only covers of a terrible suffering. Mrs. Arnott felt she was making a vain request, and begged Violet to forgive her if she asked too much in expecting her to revisit so

soon the scenes of her lost happiness ; and she proved right in her fear.

Violet answered both her friends by saying that she could not yet leave home, that its cares and her occupations with her ailing stepmother were best for her now. She could not yet have borne to see Mrs. Arnott, or even Nelly, again without pain.

“Knowing all you do of the past, you will understand this,” she wrote. “Some future time, when I can better realise it all, and can speak to you with less restraint, you will see I am not ungrateful for your kindness.”

Was it because her generous heart dreaded that Norman should be thought hardly of by others that Violet could not bring herself to tell all, all she knew, at least, to her anxious friends, even while she felt that she herself could never forgive his injury ? Perhaps it was so, more than she was aware of, more than she would herself have believed, in the first shock of wounded pride.

Whenever Mr. Wilmot came now to Westford House, Violet met him with a shuddering repugnance, and avoided him more than

ever. For it was impossible not to connect him in her own mind in some way with the wreck of her happiness. Had he not been her evil genius ever since they first met, hers and Norman's?

She supposed he knew from Eleanor that all was over between herself and Norman, for he refrained from naming him to her, and continued towards her his lately acquired respectful distance of demeanour.

CHAPTER V.

It was painfully sad to see Violet now, so pale, so quiet and tearless, so different from the joyous, smiling Violet of the happy days at Ashleigh Court, never speaking of her pain, never mentioning Norman's name even, wearing always that weary look in her soft eyes, doing all as usual, too proud to burden others with her sorrow.

And yet the story of her life seemed finished, the story of its happiness at least, and she only waited for the end, longing for it at times with a feverish longing which she strove against as impious. She had no care for anything now, only to stay at home and be the companion and attendant of her step-mother. Mrs. Mortimer was growing to love Violet strangely, and it must have been soothing to the young girl's heart to see how necessary she had become to her.

But Mrs. Mortimer could not but perceive the utter change in Violet, and in consequence

she wondered more than ever what it could be that had separated her and Norman. If she ventured to express her uneasiness to Violet, asking if she were really well, she only smiled and assured her nothing ailed her. Eleanor too would make the same enquiry at times, though if Violet had not been so preoccupied she might have seen it was only with a kind of restraint she did so. She would sit sometimes watching Violet unobserved, with a strange triumph in her cold eyes and a peculiar smile on her lips ; but even *she* would turn away at times as though the sight of Violet's mute suffering were too much for her, as though she feared it might excite her compassion.

There was more peace now between Eleanor and her mother, because Violet, being so constantly with Mrs. Mortimer, saved them from ever being alone together, and so their opportunities for disagreement were only few and far between.

The bright warm summer days were passing on, only recalling to Violet the sweet, familiar joys of the previous summer, when she and Norman had just become engaged, and the days had been one round of happiness, with

dear grandmamma partaking in it. At this time Violet scarcely ever cared to go out of doors ; the very sunshine, the summer's breeze, with its scented odours, everything she loved so enthusiastically, were only painful now to the sensitive heart. She always felt cold now ; even on these warm, bright days she would sit close to the fire, as though its heat were pleasant, as though the warm, rich life within her had become cold and stagnant, crushed by the shock to her sensitive nature, crushed by the blow to her firm, loving trust in Norman's love and confidence. He was *never* absent from her thoughts ; his face haunted her dreams, the deep grey eyes smiling on her with Norman's own smile, until she awoke to the cruel reality so hard to grow accustomed to after the sweet deceptive dream. There were times when Violet would puzzle her weary brain for hours together with hopeless conjectures as to what Norman had believed against her. What could it have been, that he even refused to name it to her ? It could not have been a report of anything openly false on her part, anything which would have plainly showed her intention to be faithless to him, because if so, he *must* have been

undeceived by the very wording of her letter of appeal, her very anxiety to show him her constancy. No, it could not be that, and the ever-recurring conviction that it was something relating to Mr. Wilmot would come to her with redoubled force. Perhaps Norman had believed of her that she had accepted Mr. Wilmot's advances too readily, more especially in his own absence, and then when her earnest denial reached him it must have seemed to him as written merely in her alarm and repentance, and he had thus refused to believe her or notice her appeal.

With the recollection so fresh in her mind of the evening on which Norman had allowed his hasty suspicion to escape him concerning Mr. Wilmot, Violet knew only too well how the least rumour connecting her name with his would exasperate him ; but how he could believe at once, so easily, that she could carry on a course of deception as to her conduct, and then totally disbelieve her written defence, was to Violet a hopeless mystery. Who could have been his informant, who could have so deliberately injured her but Mr. Wilmot himself ? Alas ! to think how soon her influence must have vanished with her presence, that

Norman could credit, above her own word, the testimony of one he so shunned and hated ! And all this time what must he now be suffering, stern and haughty as he was, believing her to have been false to her engagement, convinced at best of her weakness and frivolity, and that he had been utterly deceived as to her real character !

Summer was waning fast, dying out warmly and brightly, when one day Violet stood before the sitting-room fire, shivering now and then as if its heat were not sufficient, though the sun was shining too into the room.

“Violet, my love, are you so very cold, that you shiver so ? You cannot be well,” and Mrs. Mortimer looked anxiously at Violet, who smiled as she replied,—

“Indeed, I’m quite well, mamma. But I am cold always now, somehow. I suppose I must be getting a cold, that’s all, mamma, so don’t mind me ;” but she pressed her hand to her forehead and bent closer over the fire.

Two days later, Violet was ill, dangerously so, the doctor said, with a low, nervous fever, and she lay utterly prostrate, knowing her danger, for she made them tell her the truth,

feeling that her life might be ebbing away, and yet could summon no care, no wish to live, no strength to fight against death. A little while ago, how she would have clung to life, with its love and joys, how she would have shrunk from the icy touch of the destroyer; but now it seemed as though she could do nothing but lie there, seeing death approach, and make no exertion to resist it. It was a trouble even to take nourishment, and she refused as much as possible the remedies which were to keep her in a world which was dark and joyless for her henceforth,

Mrs. Mortimer was in despair at the prospect of losing Violet, and her sorrow was sincere, though perhaps somewhat mixed with selfishness. What would she do without her, now when she was grown accustomed to the expectation of having her always with her? She, with her own weak health, was unable to nurse Violet, who was attended chiefly by Eleanor, who performed her duties so firmly, so quietly and exactly, as to gain the warm praise of Violet's principal medical attendant.

“If Miss Mortimer would only take

nourishment, with your sensible, admirable nursing, Miss Gordon, I should have hopes of her," he said to Eleanor; "As it is, if she does recover, you will in great measure have saved her life."

If the worthy physician could have seen Eleanor when she was alone in her own room, just after he had first declared Violet to be in great danger, he would have been sorely puzzled by the demeanour of one who always appeared to him so calm and unruffled. She seemed under the influence of some strong excitement, as though some terrible conflict were passing in her soul, and she walked to and fro with a look of horror on her pale, chiseled features.

"Oh, God! do not let her die!" she groaned. "Even *I* could not bear all my life to know that I had killed her! But she *will* die, they say!" and going to her writing-case, she took out pen and paper and began to write, as though easing herself of some terrible burden. "I must do it," she said to herself; "Louis Wilmot must look to himself."

Then she stopped and seemed to consider, a hard look replacing that of fear

upon her face, and she pushed away her writing-case.

“No, I cannot! It would only be too late, and I should draw odium and disgrace on myself for nothing. And why *should* I pity her or him—why should I spoil my revenge? He slighted me, likened me to a statue, as having no life, no feeling, and but for her I might have made him love me. Let him suffer as I have done! And for her, well, it is not I who have brought her to this last pass; it is natural illness. All that can be done by care and nursing I will do, if that will keep her alive, though her death would make my secret safe. More I cannot do, *never*, the weakness is past!”

And as the strong feeling of horror vanished, the momentary repentance went with it; the evil triumphed, and the moment of grace might never occur again. Eleanor was as calm as ever once more as she tore into tiny pieces the paper on which she had written a few lines.

On the third day after Violet had been declared in danger, Mrs. Mortimer, in despair at her sinking state, took upon herself to write to Mrs. Arnott, begging her to come

if possible to see Violet, in hopes that she would have influence with her in persuading her to overcome her distaste for nourishment, and be able to induce her to take the remedies prescribed for her. At present she lay, drifting into eternity, as it were, helpless, and without any clinging to that life which had lost its charm, its one happiness for her. Mrs. Mortimer's note brought Mrs. Arnott to Westford House late on the very evening of the day on which she received it.

On introducing herself, Mrs. Mortimer apologised for the liberty she had taken; but Mrs. Arnott interrupted her gently,—

“Mrs. Mortimer, I take it as a great kindness to myself as well as to Violet, that you did so. If I had known before that she was ill, I should have myself asked for your permission to come to her. I have left my children all safe and well, so you must let me stay and nurse Violet for the next few days at least, to relieve you and Miss Gordon. She *must* not die, Mrs. Mortimer, not like this! There *must* be happy days in store for her yet!”

And something in the earnest tone of

Violet's friend brought hope to Mrs. Mortimer's heart, and, as she looked on the sweet face of the still youthful widow, she did not wonder at Violet's affection for her. Much of unselfish love and true, unworldly kindness was being brought before Mrs. Mortimer's eyes now, before it was quite too late, after her ill-directed, selfish life.

"We must prepare Violet to see you, Mrs. Arnott," she said, gently; "she is too weak and heedless of everything around her to have expressed any wish herself to see you or anyone."

Eleanor told Violet gently and gradually of Mrs. Arnott's arrival, for they feared to excite her. The news had the effect of rousing Violet beneficially; she smiled in unmistakable pleasure on hearing who had come, and she asked Eleanor eagerly if Mrs. Arnott were really in the house.

"Why should I feel any pain at meeting her," she thought, "now when I am dying? It will be so nice, such rest, to have her here at the last, as grandmamma had;" and she was diverted from the one thought ever in her mind during her illness. "Will Norman be sorry, just a little, when he hears I'm

dead? And if he ever discovers that he wronged me! Oh! would it not be better if he never did! he would suffer so terribly! And I have felt as if I could never forgive him! But it is not that. I forgive him now, I always did; how could I help it? But I could never forget. However I might wish it, confidence and trust could never be between us again!"

There was a strange, unbearable pain in Mrs. Arnott's heart when she entered Violet's room and looked again upon her young friend. The face covered with a burning flush, the beautiful eyes bright with fever, the form she had known so gracefully buoyant with health and joy now helpless and prostrate, or, at intervals, restless with weariness and pain!

"Violet, my darling, are you glad to see me?" and trying to keep back her tears, Mrs. Arnott bent close over the bed, taking the little hands, so hot and burning, in both her own, and her touch was very refreshing to Violet, who smiled peacefully,—

"You've come so far, to see me! How good you are! I shall be quite happy now. You won't go yet?" she asked, very earnestly.

“ I’ve come to stay until you are getting well, darling, to nurse you myself.”

Violet shook her head, and a slight shudder passed over her fevered frame.

“ You need not be afraid to tell me the truth ; they’ve told me already, Mrs. Arnott. You never thought once, to see me in this state, did you ? And if *I* had known it ! But I was too happy, too full of joy ; I should never have believed this could be coming. So soon after grandmamma, so very soon, and you were with her too ! ”

Mrs. Arnott drew closer still to the suffering girl, as she said very gently and earnestly,—

“ Violet, my darling, I cannot bear to hear you speak in that way. You must get well, indeed, you must, love. You must not think, because life looks so dreary now, that it will be always so. Knowing the past as I do, I am aware how dark and painfully sad the future must look ; but you are too right-minded, Violet, to think that nothing remains for you to do or wish for. A short time since, all looked so bright and happy, you could not have believed you were so near to sorrow ; and in the same way now, when all seems so dark to you, may not happiness be

near again? It is impossible, you think? Well, then, at least, darling, for us, your friends, don't you wish to live? may you not be always, are you not now, a blessing and comfort to your stepmother? Is there not something in the knowledge that you have gained her love so completely, after her early neglect? I don't ask for more of your confidence, Violet, not yet, while it is painful to speak of what has occurred; but if there is *anything* in which I can help you, I know you will tell it me—if not for your own sake only, for Norman's;" then she added in a whisper, after a pause, "Forgive me, love, it is better you should not hide so entirely in your own heart the grief that has brought you to this. So you must promise me now to take every means, every remedy to save your life; you must refuse nothing, love, for it is not like my brave Violet to throw away her precious life, which *must* be happy yet, though she does not believe it at present. Think, love, how Mrs. Ashleigh would have spoken to you if she had been at your side now."

Violet had listened attentively to Mrs. Arnott's words.

“Thank you,” she whispered, earnestly, “for speaking to me like that. I have been very wrong, very wicked to wish to throw away my life. I will never wish it again. I know that happiness can never come to me again, and life *does* look so dark, so dreary; but I will try to live, not to be so selfish. You may give me anything you like now, I will take everything, though it tires me so,” and she sighed wearily. “Mrs. Arnott,” she continued, “don’t think me unkind because I do not tell you more. I cannot! oh no, not yet, I *cannot*! And it would only be useless. But oh, Mrs. Arnott! how could I have thought I was fit to die? For so long I have thought of nothing but my grief, and rebelled against it; for so long, he—Norman—has been the only thought in my mind, and I may, perhaps *must*, die, and I see now how unfit I am!”

Very gently Mrs. Arnott soothed Violet back to calmness, and before many hours were over, the weary heart, under the consoling influence of religion, with its blessed ministrations, was resigned either to live on in this world or to enter into the dark valley of death.

Violet took every nourishment, every remedy which was ordered for her now ; but for two or three days yet her life continued in danger. She was delirious sometimes, and Mrs. Arnott could with difficulty preserve her own firmness as she listened to the piteous ravings, of Norman and the past happiness, of "grandmamma" and Ashleigh Court, her own name at times mingling with Violet's wanderings. Once or twice she let fall incoherent expressions concerning "Louis Wilmot" and "the letters," and plaintive but broken words of reproach to Norman, but never anything which gave Mrs. Arnott any approach to a clear idea of what had happened, only sufficient to puzzle her, if possible, more than before. And Eleanor pretended to be as much in the dark as herself, to be as much puzzled as to what could have occurred between Violet and Norman.

During these two or three days of terrible anxiety Mrs. Arnott hardly left Violet's side for a moment, praying silently and fervently during her tender cares, that her young, much-loved friend might be spared. It was so terribly sad to think of her dying thus, so young, so weighed down by a sorrow of which

she could not bear to speak. For Mrs. Arnott knew that which the physician did not (though he must have had his suspicions), what it was that had struck Violet so low ; she knew it was the sad, unaccountable, hopeless alienation of him who had formed her whole happiness, that was wearing the young life away, rendering her void of that strong, natural clinging to earth which so lately had been hers.

“ If only I had all her confidence ! ” was Mrs. Arnott’s frequent thought. “ And yet even if anything could be done (which she cannot now believe), Norman is too far away. Oh ! if it is his fatal pride which has worked their separation, and he discovers his fault too late, his life-long pain and repentance will be so terrible to see ! ”

From her first introduction to Eleanor Gordon, Mrs. Arnott had thought that, with all her show of care of Violet, there was something wanting in heartiness and reality, in her whole demeanour, and for this reason she instinctively tried to be, as much as possible, Violet’s sole nurse. She wrote every day a few lines to Nelly Woodford, who was unable to contain her grief at Violet’s danger. If it

had not been that her presence might only excite her friend by painful remembrances, Nelly would have prevailed on her parents to allow her to go to London and remain under Harry's protection for a few days, until Violet should be either better or all was over.

Harry Woodford, who was pursuing his studies in London, had called several times at Westford House upon his sister's friend, and sharing Nelly's sorrow at the breaking off of Violet's engagement with Norman Ashleigh, he called to enquire after her now during her illness as often as he could.

Louis Wilmot, too, called two or three times to enquire after Violet. Once he came in and saw Eleanor; but Mrs. Arnott would tell Violet nothing of his coming, guessing rightly that his very name was distasteful to her.

Violet recovered, thanks to her youth and Mrs. Arnott's loving care and soothing presence, so indescribably different from Eleanor's.

Four days after her arrival Mrs. Arnott had the inexpressible joy of hearing the doctor declare her young friend out of danger.

She had loved Violet dearly ever since their

first acquaintance, but now, during her illness and sorrow, they had been brought closer still together, and Mrs. Arnott felt indeed as though it were a dear young sister she saw rescued from so early a death. Her first act was to offer up a murmured prayer of thanksgiving that Violet was spared, and there were tears of joy in her eyes as she told the happy news to Mrs. Mortimer, who, since Violet's illness had begun to take a favourable turn, had been profuse in her thanks and expressions of gratitude to Mrs. Arnott.

Eleanor had been present when the doctor declared his young patient out of danger; but beyond a smile and a few words expressive of her relief at the news, no change was visible in her demeanour.

Mrs. Arnott remained yet a few days longer with Violet, not exciting her by talking much to her, but always by her side, reading to her sometimes to divert her from the thoughts which she knew were her constant companions during this, at best, sorrowful convalescence.

Violet herself did not speak much now, not so much even as she had done when her life was still in danger; she seemed too weak to

do anything but lie still or silently take the meals which were always brought to her by Mrs. Arnott. Her recovery was slow at first. How could it be otherwise, with that continual looking forward to the weary, dark future which was ever upon her during this her journey back from the borders of death to the busy world, which was joyless now to her ! Many a time did Mrs. Arnott think of how different it would have been had Violet been recovering from an illness such as this, during the days she was so happy in Norman's love ! How gladly and quickly would the joyous heart have embraced the certain hope of remaining in a world so full of love and looking so bright with happiness ! And Norman's presence, his tender words, his rapture on knowing that his darling was spared to him, would have been Violet's best, surest medicine !

On one occasion, when Violet was at the worst, in an interval of her delirium, she had whispered to Mrs. Arnott as the latter bent over her,—

“Mrs. Arnott, you have been very, very kind in not asking me to tell you more, and not thinking me unkind for speaking so little

of it to you. Mrs. Arnott, my death must be nothing to Norman now ; but I want to entreat you if ever the day *should* come, that he discovers how all this has come between us, and if he reproaches himself, that you will, if you can, if you *possibly* can, let him know that I forgave him freely, that I do not cherish any resentment for the pain he has given me, which he will then see to have been so great. It was only at first that I felt I could not forgive him ; now, all that is past. But under no circumstances would it be possible that *perfect* confidence could be restored between us."

And Mrs. Arnott knew it was the latter knowledge which was so hard to bear, so crushing in its weight, making even the past appear only a happy, blissful delusion. Now, when the days came that Violet was able to sit up in her bed, supported by her pillows, when her recovery began to advance more rapidly, Mrs. Arnott was obliged to return home to her children. It would have been easier for her to leave Violet if she could have only hoped she would come to visit her as soon as she was strong enough to leave home, if she could have persuaded her to come and

recover among the hills she loved so well. But she knew it would be impossible, and so she would not distress Violet by naming it to her ; she knew only too well that for some time yet her dear young friend would not be able to face the loved scenes of her lost happiness.

It came to the hour preceding Mrs. Arnott's departure, and she was sitting alone with Violet until the last minute. Violet sat up in bed, with her hands, cool now, but so weak and white, lying listlessly before her. She was smiling as she talked to Mrs. Arnott.

“I can't thank you properly, you know, for coming to me,” she said ; “but you understand all I feel and would *like* to say, Mrs. Arnott. I should have died, I know I should, if you had not come when you did. Before then I was unable to think or see how dreadful it was to want to die as I did, to feel so sure that I could never try to bear my—my pain, if I lived. You see I had been *so* happy, and it was very hard to know—to know it was all over, all over without any hope, and—*he* must have suffered so too ! But you mustn't be uneasy now. I shall be calmer always

now ; I can realize it all better, and I see that my happiness was too great, that I was selfish in fancying I ought never to suffer, as others, as you have done ; ” and the weak little hand was placed in Mrs. Arnott’s, and the mournful brown eyes, looking so large and luminous, were raised tenderly to her friend’s face.

“ Yes, darling, I *have* suffered.” And Mrs. Arnott’s gentle voice trembled slightly. “ At first, when my husband died, so young and so soon after our marriage, it did seem very hard, and but for Dick and Florry, I should have longed to die too in the first weary days that I used to spend in teaching myself to grow reconciled. And when little Harry was born, it was very sad to think that he could never see his father, never be taken in his arms as the others had been, and so I determined at least he should have his father’s name. I shall never forget dear Mrs. Ashleigh, how kind she was then ! And yet, Violet, by the time you came to Ashleigh Court, I had learnt to see what great happiness was yet left to me, and I can think of my husband with a quiet sorrow which does not make me unhappy or wish to die, though

there are times when I long for his presence very, very much. And so with you, though all looks dark, and the effort to be patient will be terribly hard many a time when your thoughts overwhelm you ; still, you will find that there can be another kind of happiness than the one you have lost, a quiet, patient happiness of which you *cannot* be robbed, because it will consist in your very resignation. And you will be so much to Mrs. Mortimer, Violet. Scarcely anyone but yourself, my generous girl, would have won her love so soon and made her see (by her own confession) how selfish she had been. But Violet, love, I *cannot* think, after such a love as yours and Norman's, that so soon and so cruelly all is over between you. You tell me I am wrong ; well, then, at least, I must say to you again, that if there is *any* way in which I could help you to clear away any painful mistake or misunderstanding, the day that would see you and Norman brought together again would be the happiest I have known since Harry died."

The tears were in Violet's eyes as she thanked Mrs. Arnott with an eloquent glance ; but she gently shook her head, and then

turned away for a moment. Then she tried to smile as she said,—

“When I can bear it, some future time—if—Norman is still away, you must let me come to you, to be with you and the children again like the old times. How quietly and unselfishly *you* have borne your sorrow! How little you have even said of it to me! But I shall always think of you now when I am tempted to rebel, in the weary days that are coming. You’ll tell Nelly, if you write to-morrow, won’t you, that the first thing I shall do when I get up will be to write to her?”

“Yes indeed, love; and how impatient she will be for your letter!”

A few minutes later, Mrs Arnott had bidden adieu to Violet and left Westford House, taking with her the earnest thanks of Mrs. Mortimer, who during these anxious days had learnt to appreciate more than ever the young stepdaughter whose recovery she attributed in great measure to Mrs. Arnott’s loved presence and tender nursing. Eleanor was secretly gratified at Mrs. Arnott’s departure. Though the latter never attempted to speak to her on the subject of Norman Ashleigh since Eleanor had briefly said that Violet’s

ravings concerning his conduct were unintelligible to her, yet she was in daily fear of being questioned by her, and so maintained towards her a certain reserve of demeanour which did not prepossess Mrs. Arnott, who yet could not but acknowledge her outward kindness to Violet and her readiness to assist in the anxious nursing.

The day came duly when Violet was able to move about again, slowly at first, and looking very pale and shadowy. Mrs. Mortimer took her away to the seaside, and Eleanor accompanied them, being obliged to go whether she liked it or not, in order to attend to her mother, who had soon found the difference between her attentions and Violet's.

It was pleasant to Violet to be away from London during these balmy September days, to be able to sit looking out in delicious idleness, looking out once more upon the sea, instead of the genteel street with its opposite row of houses, which had greeted her eyes at home as she sat at the window. It was pleasant to sit listlessly on the shore, dreamily watching the waves, listening to the sound she loved so well, though there

were times when their very music brought vividly before her the recollections of the past, with such a sharp pain, that she would start up with a shivering sigh and walk away from the shore.

She wrote often to Mrs. Arnott and Nelly, for it was a relief to write to these two friends, who understood her so well and knew what she was suffering, though she kept them still in ignorance as to what had occurred. And it was a wholesome diversion for Violet from the thoughts, the continual haunting recollections, which were her companions from morning till night, and often during the weary hours before sleep would come, bringing with it blissful oblivion or happy dreams, from which it was so cruel to wake. Now she was riding Charley again, under the shadow of the hills, by Norman's side, laughing and talking to him so happily and freely; or they sat with grandmamma in her own sitting-room, and she and Violet listened to Norman as he played with that master touch which they knew so well and so delighted to hear. Or she was singing for him and grandmamma, or learning, under his pleasant, tender tuition, some piece or

song which would have been difficult to master without his aid. Then the dream would change, and she and Norman were sitting together in their favourite nook among the cliffs, and, with the sea's wide, beautiful expanse before them, he read to her in those rich, familiar tones, from the books which were favourites with them both, or from some author he delighted to teach his girlish companion to know and appreciate with all her native enthusiasm.

And then Violet would wake to find it was only a dream! Mrs. Arnott had been right. There were moments when it was almost above Violet's strength to be calm and patient, not to rebel inwardly at the desolation which had come to her, moments when the thoughts of the lonely future seemed to bring madness to her brain, and the weary spirit in these days of bodily weakness could scarcely struggle against it. It was these times which showed Violet that, however distasteful the exertion in the soreness of her heart, she must begin at once to betake herself to those occupations which had been her favourite ones before the wreck of her happiness. And after the first

painful effort, she was rewarded, for among her books she found refuge from her own thoughts, and her favourite studies again formed matter of interest after the first bitter pang of recollection. To attempt to sing or play would not have been so easy, and Mrs. Mortimer perhaps guessed this, for she refrained from asking her to do so ; and when Eleanor played on the piano which stood in their sitting-room, Mrs. Mortimer several times noticed that the very sound of the notes sent a quiver through Violet's slight, weak frame, and that she turned away as if to hide some painful emotion which *would* appear on her face, much as she tried to hide it.

Violet could weep now, freely and often, in secret, in the quiet night time, when there was no fear of being discovered. And there began to come over her a yearning desire to be able to tell all, the real cause of her hopeless grief, to Mrs. Arnott. It would have been such a relief to speak of it to this dear, kind friend ; but no, she could not.

Was it not enough that she had to bear the agony of knowing that Norman believed her faithless, and must be suffering in proportion,

without taking on herself the additional pain of knowing that her dearest friend condemned him and thought hardly of him? Yes, almost without fully allowing it even to herself, her generous heart preferred that she should be thought by her friends to have been partly to blame in what had occurred between her and Norman, rather than that they should know his cruel mistrust, and cast odium upon him for it.

And so Violet bore on her terrible pain silently and alone, with its whole cause unexplained and undiscovered even to herself.

CHAPTER VI.

THEY had been home about a week from the seaside, and Violet had already insisted on resuming her post of principal companion and attendant of her stepmother. It did her good, and besides, she could not bear to see Eleanor's ill-disguised contempt for her mother's whims.

She had just left Mrs. Mortimer alone in her room one evening, comfortably settled for the night, and was sitting by herself down-stairs, for Eleanor was out, when Mr. Wil-mot was shown in, the very last person she wished to see. He came forward, expressing his delight at seeing her quite well again, and apologised for not having called before since their return. Violet received him very quietly, and schooled herself to hide the undefined repugnance he excited now more than ever. She told him significantly that Mrs. Mortimer had already retired, and that Eleanor was out; but he appeared to take no

notice of the hint, and sat down by her side uninvited.

Violet never remembered clearly afterwards how it exactly came about, except that it was very soon after his entrance into the room, as though he would not lose so good an opportunity, but she became conscious all at once that Mr. Wilmot was renewing in earnest, apparently impassioned tones, the offer of marriage which she had rejected more than a year ago at Windermere. She started up, her whole frame trembling, and in a few moments, looking him full in the face, she answered him,—

“More than a year ago, I gave you my answer, Mr. Wilmot. I cannot think what makes you suppose that I have changed in anything I said to you then !”

“Forgive me, Miss Mortimer ; circumstances are altered since then. But if I have been premature in hoping that now, when you are again free, you might be induced to look graciously on one who has loved you through all, and whom no power on earth should ever induce to desert you, you must forgive me, for it is in my earnest desire to see you happy, and my conviction that I

could make you so, that I have spoken. Do not reject me again, Miss Mortimer; take time to consider your answer. Only let it be that you will be my wife, that you will take shelter in my love from the world's hateful pity and commiseration, and I will wait for the rest patiently—I will wait years, if it must be, for your love.”

Oh, how Violet loathed him as he stood there, speaking in those honied tones, with that languishing gaze she had always so shrunk from, in his dark eyes! how she could have spurned him from her presence when he made that covert allusion to Norman’s conduct!

“Mr. Wilmot!” and she instinctively recoiled a step or two from him, do you not see that, after all that has happened, after your conduct on so many occasions, it is an *insult* to address such language to me now, and to suppose that I could even *listen* patiently!” and Violet’s breath came fast, while the colour, so long absent, again mounted to her pale face. “*Why* do you torment me so uselessly?” she added, and then was turning abruptly to leave the room, when—as though under some overwhelming influence, as though some maddening impulse urged her on, making her

forget her pride and hardly won patience, everything but her breaking heart, with its terrible pain—she turned upon Louis Wilmot again suddenly, with a wild reproach in her eyes,—

“God forgive you, Mr. Wilmot, if it is you who have injured me—if it is you who are delighting in the wreck of our happiness !”

The moment she had uttered the words, Violet was conscious that she would rather have died than spoken them, if she had been able to control herself. Mr. Wilmot winced a moment under the glance of those beautiful, truthful eyes, and under the sound of the voice ringing with pain. But *only* for a moment. He was perfectly calm again, merely showing a due amount of gentlemanly concern as he replied,—

“I am at a loss to understand you, Miss Mortimer, but I cherish no resentment for what you have insinuated. If it is possible that you mean I have been capable of working mischief by misrepresenting you to Mr. Ashleigh, it will be sufficient to remind you that if such a desire were in my nature, if I could have attempted such a thing, he would hardly be likely to put faith in any-

thing he could hear from one whom he honours with so much of his hatred as myself. I have scarcely deserved to hear such a suspicion from you, Miss Mortimer, though I *have* ventured to love you against your will."

To have let him be aware of her suspicion, to have shown him her inner suffering, to have betrayed it to him who would perhaps sneeringly rejoice at it! As soon as she could recover herself sufficiently to speak calmly, Violet turned towards him again,—

"Pardon me, I did not know what I was saying. Do not think any more of it, please. I do not wish to offend you, Mr. Wilmot."

And she mechanically gave him her hand, and then turned away and left the room, forgetting everything but her confusion and the intense desire to be quit of his presence.

There was a contemptuous smile on Louis Wilmot's thin lips as he watched her leave the room.

"So you *are* suffering, and bitterly too, and are terribly annoyed to have let me see it, you proud little creature!"

And he stood there still a while longer, thinking, while a frown crossed his forehead,—

“ So I’ve failed again ! Well, I was prepared for it. She has too much heart to marry me recklessly because that fellow she worships so has cast her off. More’s the pity for me, that she *has* so much heart ! But the sweet part of the revenge is safe yet ! Well, you will not have the pleasure of refusing me a *third* time, not even for all your money, Violet Mortimer ! And now to think if I can manage to exist upon two hundred a year. But it is too late to wait for anything greater, and I must secure it, the sooner the better.”

And as he made his way to the hall door and let himself out, he said to himself,—

“ How long does he intend to stay away, I wonder ? It is better than I expected, that he is away so long ; I am repaid nicely just at present for all your haughty airs and assumption of superiority, Norman Ashleigh ! ” and that mocking smile was still upon his lips as he walked away down the street.

Violet said nothing of what had occurred between herself and Mr. Wilmot, and when in a few days he came again to the house, he was, to her relief, remarkably distant in his demeanour to her.

It was about a fortnight later, when Eleanor

came one day to Violet, as the latter was alone in her bedroom, and there was the faintest hesitation in her manner as she said,—

“ Mr. Wilmot has just been, Violet.”

Violet looked up inquiringly, guessing there was something to follow.

“ He has—made me an offer, Violet, and I have accepted him,” and Eleanor’s hand toyed with an ornament on the dressing-table upon which her eyes were bent so that Violet could not meet their gaze.

“ Oh, Eleanor ! are you in earnest ? ”

“ Quite. Don’t you congratulate me ? ” and she raised her eyes now and smiled.

“ I ought, I suppose, but you surprise me so ; Eleanor, do you love him ? ”

And Violet sat down, and, with her chin resting on her hand, looked up very earnestly at Eleanor, who gazed for an instant on the pale face with its beautiful eyes, out of which the joy was all gone. Then, turning away, she laughed lightly,—

“ Well, I like him, of course, else why marry him ? but as for love, it will come in time, I suppose. I am hardly so romantic as you, dear, and I can’t afford to be. You

are rich enough to be an old maid, if you prefer it; I am not, at least, not to live as I should like. I must marry, and you know, mamma and I are not on the happiest terms. I am nearly twenty-two, and have no time to lose. Mr. Wilmot is pretty rich, and together we shall do very well. I'm aware, of course, that I'm not his first love; I know that if he could have had you, I should have been left in the lurch; but perhaps the best thing for him is to marry, and I daresay he thinks so himself."

"Eleanor, are you sure he is so rich?" asked Violet, hesitatingly.

"I never thought he was *so* rich, as you call it, Violet, but that he has a comfortable fortune, left him by his father, is a known fact. Mrs. Lester herself told the Woodfords so. You see, Violet, you never liked him, and perhaps he *has* been annoying to you sometimes, so that you can't bring yourself to believe he has anything good about him, even a little wealth."

"Well, forgive me, Eleanor. I hope you will be happy," and she smiled as she spoke, and then turned away, overwhelmed by a fresh sense of her own desolation.

Eleanor looked at her as though with a sudden remorse.

“I am so sorry, Violet, to have been obliged to tell you what has brought it—all back again.”

“Oh, never mind me, it was nothing,” and Violet bravely forced herself to smile again. “Mamma knows, of course, doesn’t she?”

“No, I came first to you. But I must go and tell her now. I wonder what she’ll say!” and as Eleanor went off to acquaint her mother that she had accepted Louis Wilmot for her husband, she looked quite calm and unconcerned, as though it mattered very little what her mother said on the subject.

Violet began to think over it all when she was alone. It seemed so strange that Eleanor was going to marry Louis Wilmot. Violet had always fancied that Eleanor disliked him rather than otherwise, though now she declared to the contrary, while avowing that it was *merely* liking, and not *love* she felt for him, and that she was marrying chiefly for a comfortable home of her own. The idea of such a loveless marriage made Violet shudder.

“Does she know how lately he renewed

his offer to me, I wonder! But she cannot know, of course. After all, perhaps she is wise," was the next bitter reflection. "*I* dreamed of love and happiness, and thought I had both so perfectly, and what is left to me now!"

But think as she would, it was not in Violet's nature to understand how Eleanor could not be content to be single, if she could not marry one she loved. And Norman's image rose before her mental vision, painfully distinct; the noble face she loved seemed to be near her again, and with a wild yearning in her heart she hid her face in her hands and wept out her sorrow, for her firmness had been gradually deserting her from the moment she had wished happiness to Eleanor.

The wedding was to take place in six weeks. There was no reason to wait, and, to Violet's surprise, Eleanor wished to have a very quiet wedding.

Mrs. Mortimer hardly knew whether to be glad or sorry at her daughter's choice. Louis Wilmot only possessed a moderate fortune, and Eleanor herself had about two hundred a year. Mrs. Mortimer would have

liked a more brilliant match for her handsome girl; but she allowed that it was likely to be long before anything better offered itself, and besides, it would no longer be very painful to part with Eleanor, who had lately become so unbearable and totally ungrateful for her affection. In her heart, Mrs. Mortimer fancied Louis Wilmot would repent, too late, of his choice.

“ Unless, indeed,” she said to herself, “ he begins with a determination to be master; and I fancy he is one to carry it out, with all his smooth, pleasant manner; and it will be best for them both in the end.”

Mr Wilmot was naturally a great deal at Westford House now; but in the intercourse between himself and Eleanor Violet perceived a restraint and coldness which puzzled her. They occasionally went together to the theatres, and very often would beg Violet to accompany them, Louis Wilmot urging his request with the respect and politeness he had again assumed towards her since her late rejection of him, but Violet always gently refused.

“ You know, mamma, I don’t care for going out,” she would say when they were gone; “ I

would rather stay with you, and they are better alone."

"What should I do, if *you* were to leave me, Violet! You may do some day, my love."

"No, never," was the quick reply; "be quite sure, mamma, that I shall always stay with you, always, as long as I live," and as Violet smiled, she pressed her hand unseen on her heart, as though to subdue the agony so well hidden from view, the pain her proud nature struggled so hard to bear silently, untold to others.

It was characteristic of Violet that she did not refuse to be bridesmaid to Eleanor, who earnestly requested it of her. When the day came, she stood by Eleanor's side before the altar, very quietly, with every word of the solemn service going through her heart like a knife. With a painful fascination she listened to Louis Wilmot while he uttered the words which bound him to "protect and cherish" Eleanor through life, and then too while Eleanor, with her accustomed self-possession, promised to "love, honour, and obey" Louis Wilmot, whom she did *not* love, as Violet knew.

How near had she and Norman been to making those sacred promises to each other! And they were nothing to each other now, never could be again!

Mr. Wilmot and Eleanor were going at once to Paris, where they meant to reside some months, before settling definitely, and Eleanor appeared to be gratified with the prospect of her sojourn in that gay capital. They left Westford House an hour or two after they returned from church, for very few guests had been invited, according to Eleanor's uncharacteristic wish, which Mrs. Mortimer's delicate health had also rendered a necessity. Eleanor parted briefly with her mother, as though it were a tiresome ordeal to go through; but when she had kissed Violet, she lingered still a moment, as she held her hand.

"Pray for me, Violet," she whispered, in so hollow a tone, and with a manner so different to her usual unmoved demeanour, that Violet was startled strangely; but Eleanor had followed her husband, and was at the door with him before Violet could question her.

The news that Eleanor was engaged

to Mr. Wilmot had greatly surprised the Woodfords and Mrs. Arnott; and even his cousin, Mrs. Lester, wondered that he had chosen one so very different to Violet, whom he had once so visibly preferred. Mrs. Lester had, however, written a most friendly letter of congratulation to him, in which she invited him to bring his wife to visit them as soon as convenient, asking him also how it was he had been so long in England lately without coming to see them.

Louis Wilmot had returned a polite, cousinly answer, thanking Mrs. Lester, and promising to pay the proposed visit when he and his wife returned from Paris in a few months' time.

CHAPTER VII.

WINTER and spring were past, and August had come round again. It was more than a year since Mrs. Lacy's death, and still Norman Ashleigh remained abroad. He had written last from Naples to his steward, but he had mentioned nothing of his return home.

And Mrs. Mortimer and Violet were going together on a visit to Mrs. Arnott. Since Violet's illness, Mrs. Arnott had had serious sickness among her own children, and for that reason, and also on account of being unable to leave Mrs. Mortimer, Violet had not seen her friend since she left her on her recovery. She had only been from home once, to the sea side again with Mrs. Mortimer, not having yet been able to accept the Woodfords' earnest invitation.

Mr. Wilmot and Eleanor had returned to London sooner than had been expected, two months after their marriage. To Mrs.

Mortimer's annoyance, Louis Wilmot had persisted in not taking a house, and they had lived in lodgings, expensive ones no doubt, but still *only* lodgings, while Mrs. Mortimer had expected that Eleanor would have been mistress of an elegant establishment at least, if not a rich one. Eleanor had always been provokingly indifferent on the matter, and, in her mother's presence at least, never attempted to argue with her husband on the subject. Perhaps she had early found out that his will was as strong as her own, and that there was little hope of his giving it up to please her. Louis Wilmot had been as mysterious as ever on the subject of his acquaintances, and his wife could never give any account to her mother and Violet of his whereabouts, when he was absent from her. Violet rarely visited Eleanor during the hours she knew Mr. Wilmot was at home, and he did not often accompany his wife when she went to her mother's house, so that Mrs. Mortimer could no longer consider him in the light of an agreeable companion. Violet could not help thinking from the first that Eleanor was unhappy. The latter was always very

quiet and subdued now, and more uncommunicative even than was natural to her. There was something in her manner of addressing her husband, something in her very tone, which made Violet think that it cost her a hard struggle to speak calmly and patiently to him, and she only called him by his name when she could not avoid doing so. And there was a coolness, a polite indifference in his manner towards his wife, which excited Violet's indignation, and even Mrs. Mortimer's sometimes.

They had been home scarcely three months when Eleanor began to look ill and languid, and to be troubled with a cough, which, however, she persisted in making light of. Mrs. Mortimer insisted to Louis Wilmot that his wife should have medical advice.

"Certainly," he had replied; "but I really did not know Eleanor was at all out of sorts."

But Eleanor still declared she did not need any advice, and she had her own way in this instance.

Mrs. Lester had more than once written to renew her invitation to her cousin and his wife to visit them in the north; but Louis Wilmot always found some excuse to offer

her, and had evidently no intention of yet accepting her invitation. Mrs. Mortimer had given up urging him to do so, and confined herself to the old complaint of his not taking a house.

“Why do you persist in staying in apartments?” she said to him one day. “Eleanor would be much more comfortable in a house of her own, and the remarks people make about it are very unpleasant.”

“My dear Mrs. Mortimer, I don’t think Eleanor cares anything about it; besides, it is merely for the present. We shall take a house later on;” and the dispute always ended thus.

One day, towards the end of June, Mrs. Mortimer and Violet went to call upon Eleanor, whom it chanced they had not seen for a week.

On arriving at her lodgings, they found that Mr. and Mrs. Wilmot had left some days, and their landlady could give no account of where they were gone. She fancied they had been in trouble about debts, which they were unable to pay, because she had overheard Mrs. Wilmot speak some angry words to her husband, which made her suspect so, and

Mrs. Wilmot seemed to care little to conceal it. They had paid her all they owed her, just before leaving, and had gone off hurriedly, only acquainting her the previous night of their intention to leave her.

And from that day Mrs. Mortimer and Violet had heard nothing of Eleanor and her husband, and Mrs. Lester could give them no information concerning them. And it was evident that Eleanor, as well as her husband, intended to remain undiscovered, for if she had wished it, he could not have prevented her from writing to her mother, though it might perhaps be out of her power to come to her.

All Mrs. Mortimer's love for her daughter seemed to return now that she had lost her, and no longer suffered annoyance from her temper and ingratitude. At first she spent her days in violent reproaches against Louis Wilmot for his deception in feigning to be rich, and for his whole treatment of his wife. Was poverty and inability to meet their debts really the cause of their disappearance? What had become of Eleanor's own money? Unfortunately, it was not secured from her husband's grasp; but could he have squandered

it already? The mystery and wretched uncertainty and suspense made Mrs. Mortimer seriously ill, and Violet had an anxious time of it until she recovered. What with her trouble and perhaps the constant presence of a generous, tender nature like Violet's, Mrs. Mortimer was becoming wonderfully softened and more unselfish.

Thus, when Mrs. Arnott wrote, earnestly asking them both to visit her, Mrs. Mortimer, though it had long been her wish to visit the neighbourhood of Ashleigh Court, especially since she had made Mrs. Arnott's acquaintance, would not consent to go until Violet positively assured her she wished it, and that it would not be painful to her. Her stepmother's tenderness was very precious and soothing to Violet, coming now when she needed it most, when her life's great love had failed her and proved but a dream.

She was very anxious to visit Mrs. Arnott soon, for surely Norman Ashleigh would not remain much longer abroad, and once he returned home, she must bid adieu to seeing her friend until she could come to London to her.

Very pale and quiet was Violet always

during this time, with that sad, haunting gaze in her soft eyes, so different from the joyous, happy girl, who had been so surrounded with love at Ashleigh Court. Her outward strength had returned to her, but she could never be the same, *never* again, unless the past could be restored, unless the cruel wound she carried always could be healed, and that was—impossible. She would sit and think sometimes of her life and its brief, great happiness, gone so early. She would think of those she had lost, those three who had been dearest to her: her father dead long ago, then Mrs. Ashleigh had been so soon taken away, and lastly, Norman, dearest of all, dearer than all the world, dearer than life. He was a stranger henceforth, even if they ever met again, if he did not die without returning home, as she often pictured to herself he would do. And she loved him so, she must do so till the end, in spite of his cruel mistrust, which even yet she could scarcely realize at times, and which was as much a mystery as ever.

Violet had resumed all her duties and occupations, and it was well for her, perhaps, that Mrs. Mortimer required so much of her attention, for it helped her to keep away the

thoughts which would have been too much for her, it kept her from dwelling continually on her pain, on the one image which haunted her dreams. She was very calm now, and even cheerful too in her stepmother's presence, singing for her often to make her forget her anxiety about Eleanor, singing her old songs again, bravely, without a sign of emotion, because pride prevented her from breaking down. But she never sang when alone, for then the necessity for self-control was gone, and she could not have borne the memories which would have crowded upon her half-breaking heart.

Mrs. Mortimer's health and her trouble about her daughter excused her and Violet from going much into society, and so they lived alone together, very peacefully and quietly.

And Nelly Woodford was engaged to be married! She wrote to tell the news to Violet shortly after the disappearance of Eleanor and her husband. She wrote as though half ashamed to own that she was really conquered, after all, and that Violet's prophecy had come true; and Violet smiled with more happiness than she had felt for

many long months on reading her letter. She was so amused at the writer's evident regret at having to own herself fairly beaten! The gentleman who had stolen Nelly's heart, which she had always declared so inaccessible, was a young officer, a son of an old friend of Major Woodford's, and Nelly was so very happy, so unmistakably so, in her new position of betrothed wife, that Violet could not but rejoice.

"I really don't know how I got drawn into it, darling," wrote Nelly. "Harry teases me dreadfully in his letters, and I often tell George that he had better change his mind and not want me, for I'm certain to torment his life out when we are married. But he won't listen to me, and even says he will be quite happy if I do torment him. I am longing for you to see him, the dear old fellow! I know you'll like him. They all do, *so much*, though poor papa is dreadfully jealous of him, I can see."

And Nelly had promised to go and stay with Mrs. Arnott for a week or so while Violet and Mrs. Mortimer were there. She was "dying to see Violet again," she wrote, just before the latter left London for the

north, for Cumberland with its hills and valleys and the seashore she loved so well.

It was a beautiful day towards the end of August when she and Mrs. Mortimer set out, very early in the morning, so as to be with Mrs. Arnott the same day. Violet exerted herself to talk to her stepmother during the long journey, and tried not to appear pre-occupied; but it was a hard struggle, especially as they approached their journey's end. She found she had overestimated her strength in thinking that she could bear to look calmly on the well-known places. The sight of the familiar station, which she had last seen when she was leaving for London after Mrs. Ashleigh's death, under Norman's protection, brought a sharp, acute pang to her heart, and as they drove along the road, every turn of which she knew so well, all the first agony seemed threatening to return and break in upon her hardly acquired patience and resignation. But she talked all the way, so that Mrs. Mortimer failed to discover how deeply Violet was feeling this coming back among the familiar scenes of her past life and happiness. Then, as they neared the sea, the very breeze blowing in at their carriage

window was redolent with memories to Violet's pent up heart.

"Mamma, there is Ashleigh Court!" and as they approached the part of the road from which the house was visible, Violet pointed in its direction, and Mrs. Mortimer looked out.

But Violet had turned away again, unable any longer to conceal her emotion. She had fancied herself strong enough to look upon her lost home calmly, at least outwardly, and now she found how she had been mistaken.

"Violet, my love!" and Mrs. Mortimer turned anxiously towards her.

"It was only for a moment, mamma; I'm all right again now," and she forced back a bitter sigh, and smiled as she began to talk again to her stepmother, who knew not all the anguish Violet was suffering just then. She could hardly have believed it possible for her to conceal it so quietly.

"The hills look just the same!" was Violet's thought—"just the same as when Norman and I used to wander over them. They are not changed as we are!"

They reached Mrs. Arnott's cottage, and Violet looked again upon the pretty garden she knew so well, which she had last seen

when leaving it with Norman, the day she went back to London. As they stepped from the coach Mrs. Arnott met them in the porch, and shaking hands with Mrs. Mortimer, welcomed her to her house for the first time, then she took a long, tender look at Violet's face, and clasped her in her arms.

“ My darling girl ! I have been so longing to see you ! ” and they went together silently into the familiar house.

Mrs. Mortimer went to bed early, and on having seen her comfortably settled, Violet came down again to the room where Mrs. Arnott sat alone, waiting for her, the children having gone to bed too.

“ I hope Mrs. Mortimer will feel at home here, love, and that she is quite comfortable,” said Mrs. Arnott, as Violet came and sat by her side at the window.

“ She is very comfortable indeed,” was Violet's smiling answer, “ only a little bit tired with the journey. Do you know, she thinks the air is doing her good already. And you've given us my favourite room ! ”

“ I knew you'd like to see the roses again, love, and they grow so beautifully now up to the window.”

It was a lovely evening, and Mrs. Arnott and Violet were silent for a few minutes as they gazed out at the glorious sunset, enjoying the soft, sweet air coming in through the open window. All was so very still and peaceful, that the outer calmness brought back to Violet the vivid recollections of all she had lost, and the terrible pain in her heart seemed to rebel against the peacefulness of everything around her. For a moment she looked at Mrs. Arnott, and their eyes met. Why were both afraid, as it were, to speak of what was in their minds, as though each did not know so well what was in the other's heart!

“Oh, Mrs. Arnott!” broke suddenly from Violet, and, all her firmness gone, she wept passionately, with her face hidden on Mrs. Arnott's breast and her slight figure encircled by her friend's arm.

“Don't try to restrain it, Violet, darling. You will be better for it afterwards,” and then Mrs. Arnott waited silently, letting Violet weep freely and without restraint in her arms.

“Violet,” she whispered at last, as she grew calmer, “you know I do not like to

intrude upon what you may not wish to tell me ; but if it is only that it would be a little painful, or that you are afraid I should blame *him* too much, don't let that prevent you any longer from giving me all your confidence. It would be better for you, love, and I know you feel so yourself, if you will only make an effort to tell me all."

And there was a painful longing in Mrs. Arnott's heart that she could do something, ever so little, towards bringing Norman and Violet together again.

She knew Violet so well ; she knew she was longing to overcome the natural pride which from childhood had enabled her to endure grief silently and *untold*, making it the harder and deeper by the very hiding of it.

And Violet was able to do so at last. With her hands clasped tightly in her friend's, and her eyes gazing straight out into the garden before her, there, as they sat in the twilight, she told Mrs. Arnott, in a trembling voice at first, but strangely calm as she went on, all that had taken place, all she could tell of the separation that had arisen between Norman and herself, recounting almost the

very words of his cruel letter, which were engraven on her memory too strongly ever to be forgotten, though the paper on which they were written had been burnt long since. She told all, even to the most painful part of her story, the letter she had written denying his accusation, whatever it might be, begging him at least to tell her openly what he had believed against her, reproaching him for his cruel mistrust. She told how it had brought no answer, that letter written in her undying confidence in Norman's love and trust, no answer but her own letters and love-tokens, sent back to her, as the best proof of Norman's utter disbelief in even her very own word and earnest appeal.

“Violet! he could do that! Norman Ashleigh disbelieve you, think you capable of such falsehood!” and Mrs. Arnott spoke as if stung with sudden pain.

Violet made no answer, but a quiver ran through her as she sat.

“I cannot understand it, Violet! I could not have believed it of him! I never thought of anything like that! I thought it was something entirely between yourselves, some unhappy dispute, and that in his pride and

anger he had reproached you in words you could not easily forgive, and so raised the barrier of separation between you. Even this seemed strange, during his absence, when letters were your only intercourse ; but I never thought of the reality, or at least I never entertained the idea a moment. How could he ? How could Norman Ashleigh, after all the past, after your long love and knowledge of each other, let himself be so blinded by mad jealousy as to believe you capable of deceiving him, and then to refuse to believe your written word, your assurance of constancy, which it must have cost you so much to write ! And you were to have been his wife, loved beyond all the world, to be guarded from every insult. Violet, he must have been mad ! ”

Mrs. Arnott was roused as Violet had never seen her before, and her sweet face was full of an indignation rare to her gentle heart. But each word reproaching Norman stung Violet with a sharp pain, the pain of one who hears a loved one blamed and disparaged.

“ Oh, Mrs. Arnott ! ” she exclaimed, “ don’t, don’t speak so hardly of him ! He must have suffered so dreadfully, and he was

so deceived before once, that he could not help being readier to suspect and believe that there was falsehood than he would otherwise have been!"

Mrs. Arnott looked at Violet very earnestly, as the latter spoke those words, which showed the depths of undying love in her heart for him in whose love and confidence she had said she could never feel safe again, whom she could never forgive, as she said, however he might ask it, sufficiently to let full trust be once more between them.

"Violet, I seem bewildered. There must have been some terrible mistake, or some malignant scheme to injure you! Yet who is there who could wish to injure you or Norman,—except indeed—" and as their eyes met, Violet knew Mrs. Arnott was thinking of the only person possible, Louis Wilmot, though neither of them had yet mentioned his name.

"But, my darling, Norman could never be influenced by anything *he* could do to injure you! He knew Mr. Wilmot hated him for having won you,—for though you have refrained from telling me that Mr. Wilmot actually proposed to you, from a delicate

kindness he did not merit, I know he *did* so, and I know too how his pursuit annoyed you."

"Mrs. Arnott, that is the hardest part of all, which I can *never* forget, that—Norman preferred to believe him before me, that he must have put such faith in Mr. Wilmot's misrepresentations as to utterly disbelieve *my* very own letter. What did he think I was, to have acted a lie so long, as he believed ! Mrs. Arnott, he can never have loved me as I did him, to mistrust me on the first opportunity. *I* should have died rather than have believed *him* false for an instant, unless he told me so himself, and I thought once it would have been the same with him. But it is all over now ; why should I trouble anyone with speaking of it ? " and she rose and dashed away the remaining tears, and went nearer still to the window, but shivered as though she were cold. Mrs. Arnott closed the window and drew Violet to her side again. She had recovered her calmness, and seemed to be thinking deeply as she said suddenly,—

"Violet, the more I think of it, the less I can believe it of Norman. There must have been something, some strongly painful, seem-

ingly undeniable proof, before he could think you false, and even about your letter of appeal there must have been some mystery of which we know nothing. Either that, or Norman Ashleigh must have been mad, or we have been altogether mistaken in his nature, and *that* is impossible. Violet, if he returns (and Mrs. Brownson is continually praying for it), and all is explained, when you see his anguish, his dreadful self-reproach, my darling, you *must* not both be wretched for life, you *must* forgive him. Mind, I would not say this if I did not feel sure there must have been something more than a mere injurious report. If I thought it had only been the latter, then indeed Norman could never even *ask* you to forget; but I cannot feel so, and you know I can think more calmly and clearly about it than you, love, whom it concerns too nearly. How you have suffered, my poor Violet—and it must have been so dreadful to think of during that illness—and I did not know! Thank God you did not die, my love! Oh, Violet, you will forgive Norman, for Mrs. Ashleigh's sake too, who loved you so, who would have been so unhappy to see you thus!"

But Violet turned away.

“Mrs. Arnott, he will never ask me to forgive him. It is impossible. What will convince him he was wrong, if my own word did not? And he will think of that time he was deceived years ago, and that will strengthen him in his resolution. But I *have* forgiven him, Mrs. Arnott, long since; but I *cannot* forget,—oh, how could you think so!”

Mrs. Arnott only sighed, and stealing her arm round Violet’s waist, she kissed her earnestly. Well she knew how deep in the generous heart rankled the bitter wound which could make Violet speak such words, give vent to a feeling so foreign to her nature, steeling herself against the possible repentance of him whom she loved at this very moment, Mrs. Arnott knew, as strongly as ever. It was useless urging her further now, with that proud determination on her pale face, and that fixed look in her soft eyes, which no longer shone with joy and happy love. And Mrs. Arnott felt that perhaps, after all, she had been wrong in her hope, perhaps there *was* no excuse for Norman’s conduct in letting himself be so easily deceived into believing Violet false, and so cruelly, in a manner so unlike his honourable nature, rejecting

her own earnest appeal. No, Violet could *never* forget that, and she was wrong to have urged her to it.

What would be Violet's future, Mrs. Arnott wondered with a sigh; was her life to be always desolate and dark, the young girl she remembered so surrounded by happiness and love?

Neither of them spoke again until the lights were brought in, and when they were alone again, Mrs. Arnott turned to Violet.

"Then you have 'heard nothing yet of the Wilmots, Violet? I was in hopes you would have better news to tell me. But it cannot go on long in this way. *She* at least must write or come herself, soon, to Mrs. Mortimer."

Violet shook her head sadly.

"Mrs. Arnott, I'm sure mamma is afraid, though she won't say so, that they have left England. But if Eleanor would only send a *line*, it would be just a little comfort to mamma. Mr. Wilmot surely cannot prevent that! It was the strangest thing, her marrying him at all, Mrs. Arnott! I can't help feeling sure now that Eleanor was only trying to seem happy, even before they were married."

Then after a pause she continued,—

“I’m sure coming here will do mamma so much good. She is always talking about you, Mrs. Arnott, ever since—you came to me,” and Violet looked fondly at her friend.

Mrs. Arnott smiled and took Violet’s hand caressingly in her own.

“And to-day week, love, Nelly will be here. She is longing to see you again. I knew, dear, that you would like to be here a few days before her.” And Mrs. Arnott bent her face closer to Violet’s as she added in a lower tone, “I knew you would like to have the first pain over of seeing the old spots again, before meeting Nelly, and then I know she will do you good, love.”

“Thank you, *dear* Mrs. Arnott; you are right. I wonder what would become of me if you were not always so kind!” then, with an effort to be cheerful, she went on earnestly, “I’m *so* glad about Nelly; I can’t tell you how glad it made me to get her letter telling me of it! Oh, Mrs. Arnott! I *hope* she’ll be happy; she *must* be, of course. But don’t you remember how we used to dispute on the subject, and she used to declare she would never fall in love, and that there was

no life so happy as an old maid's? How we can laugh at her now, poor Nelly!" And though Violet smiled with Mrs. Arnott at the thought of Nelly's determination so soon proving a failure, there was the thought too in her aching heart, "How Norman would have enjoyed it, how he would have enjoyed congratulating Nelly after all their many disputes, in which he is now proved to have been right!"

That night, when Mrs. Arnott bade Violet a tender "good-night," the latter whispered as they separated,—

"In the morning you must let me go down early to the shore, by myself. You know why. I shall feel quite settled after I have been there again, for the first time, alone."

"Violet, love, you know you are to do just as you like here. You shall go alone to-morrow morning, and if you cannot get out early, I will take care of Mrs. Mortimer and show her the garden while you are away."

And so once more Violet slept near Ashleigh Court, among the hills, where she had known all her life's short happiness.

CHAPTER VIII.

IT was one afternoon, about three weeks later, when once more Norman Ashleigh found himself in London, walking slowly through one of the most crowded streets of the busy metropolis. He had arrived in England two or three days previously, after his chosen exile of more than a year. He had just posted a letter to Mrs. Brownson, announcing his return and telling her to expect him at Ashleigh Court three days later, naming the train by which he should leave London.

Yes, in three days he will be at home again, and as he goes along, with the same proud, yet graceful, gentlemanly bearing as ever, but with a fixed expression of stern, settled care upon his face, which had not been on it when last he walked the streets of London, he is thinking that he might as well have returned a year ago, for all the forgetfulness or peace he has gained by his

prolonged absence. He has had no communication with his friends during all this time, has scarcely ever seen an English newspaper, and has avoided both, and now that he is once more in England, it is to find how little he has gained by remaining away, by sojourning first at one, then another of the continental cities, except that now, instead of sooner, he has to face his lonely home, and the unexpressed sympathy of his friends, so bitter to his haughty spirit. He does not know whether Violet Mortimer has married the man he hates, or whether anything has occurred to prevent it, and he tells himself that, whichever way it may be, it is nothing to him ; he tells himself so, but it is fruitless, for at this very moment the knowledge that, though not probable, it is possible that he might meet her here in the streets, brings back all the agony and stormy passion of the day on which he first knew of her weakness and treachery, and there is a wish, amounting almost to a prayer in his heart just now, that he may *not* meet her, not now, at least, until he is calmer.

Norman did not know that for the last two or three minutes a woman, or young

lady rather, had been walking on the opposite side of the street without once taking her eyes off him. Suddenly she seemed to take a resolution, and crossing the street rapidly, almost running, she came up beside Norman.

“Mr. Ashleigh!” she whispered, and then she was stopped by a painful cough, which seemed to have been brought on by the exertion of crossing the street so quickly.

Roused from his thoughts, Norman Ashleigh started and turned on hearing his name and feeling the touch on his arm, and saw Eleanor Gordon standing by his side. He knew her at once, though her face was terribly altered, being wretchedly thin and pale, and the eyes were hollow and brighter than he remembered them, and though she was untidily, nay shabbily, dressed, in a style forming a striking contrast to her former elegance.

“Surely it is Eleanor Gordon!” and Norman called her by her Christian name in his amazement. Mechanically he offered his hand, but she did not appear to notice the action.

“You know me then?” she said; “illness and poverty have not so entirely taken away

my beauty but that I may still be recognized ; " and she smiled a ghastly smile. " Eleanor Gordon ! yes, that was in the days before I took Louis Wilmot for my lord and master ; " and she shuddered, though the mockery of a smile was still on her face.

Again Norman started violently. What was she saying, what did she mean ?

" We shall attract notice if we stand here," she went on, heedless of the look of eager enquiry he fixed on her face. " I wonder if you'll be ashamed to walk with me," and she glanced at her dress. " No, I don't think you will ; " and she looked up to his face, " I want to take you home with me, for I have something to say to you which will take time to tell, and I cannot do it here. Can you spare the time, Mr. Ashleigh ? But you *must* ; it will only delay you about an hour."

" I do not know what you can have to say to me," he said as they walked on together, more than one of those they met turning to look at Eleanor's handsome but wretchedly haggard face, thinking her a strange companion, in her shabby attire, for the handsome, attractive-looking young man, with

his easy, gentlemanly dress and aspect. They could not see the tumult of emotions in the heart concealed beneath that young man's calm, proud exterior. "If it is anything relating to what is past, you must surely be aware that it can be nothing to me, that it cannot affect or concern me now."

"I understand. You do not wish to speak even to me, because I belong to *her*, the girl you loved and who deceived you. Of course you do not wish even to hear her name, or whether she is alive or dead, or how I came to what you see now. I suppose it is even nothing to you that Louis Wilmot is *my* husband, not hers; but all the same you must listen to what I have to say. The moment of grace may never come again, and you shall not go until I have cast my burden from me."

"I will go with you," he said, as though under a spell. He hardly dared to think what her meaning might be, his brain seemed on fire with the thoughts her words excited, and he did not speak again as they walked on together.

"It is strange that I should meet you

just when I was wishing with all my soul to do so, Mr. Ashleigh. I did not know you had returned to England, and I was wondering if I could get to know where a letter would reach you, and then to see yourself!"

There was something so different from her former manner, a reckless despair in her very voice and ghastly smile, that it excited Norman's wondering pity even in his preoccupation. She was so unlike the calm, elegant girl of little more than a year ago.

"Where are you taking me?" he asked suddenly, as they turned into a shabby, narrow street, composed mostly of small shops.

"To my *home*," and she laughed mockingly. "Very likely it will not suit your fastidious taste, but I shall not trouble you to stay long. You need not be afraid of meeting *her* here," and Eleanor led the way into a very common draper's shop, which she passed through, followed by Norman, without speaking to the woman who stood behind the counter, and who stared hard at the "swell," as she inwardly pronounced

Norman when he entered her dingy premises. Norman followed Eleanor up the stairs into a sitting-room over the shop, small and plainly furnished. The blind was down, but sufficient sun came into the room to show the dust which lay on everything, and the cracks in the table and chairs.

“This is my lodging, Mr. Ashleigh,” and the faintest colour rose to her cheeks as she spoke, as if to show there was still some pride left in haughty Eleanor. “It used to disgust *me* at first, but I don’t care now,” and again the hollow cough stopped her speech, telling its own tale of coming death. Then she continued, “Perhaps you wonder where *he* is, my husband? Shall I show him to you, all that is left of him, before I tell you what will make you wish to curse the day you ever met him or me?” and the sunken blue eyes were raised, with a strange wildness in their gaze, to his face.

Surely she did not mean that her husband was dead, and yet otherwise she could never thus coolly offer to take him into his presence!

“Mrs. Wilmot,” he said, with some im-

patience, as he drew back slightly from her, "you must excuse me, but I do not understand you. You cannot be ignorant that though I consented to come here with you, it was not in expectation of seeing your husband," and the very thought of Louis Wilmot was like madness to Norman. What did it all mean, why did he find that his enemy was not Violet's husband, but Eleanor's?

"He'll scarcely rouse your anger now, Mr. Ashleigh. Don't you understand me? Louis Wilmot can never do you any more harm; he is *dead!*!" and Eleanor almost hissed out the last word, as she turned and motioned Norman to follow her, which he did, feeling as though in a dream.

Louis Wilmot, the destroyer of his life's happiness, who had been loved by Violet Mortimer, and who had perhaps been false to her, for aught Norman knew, dead!

Eleanor stopped before a door near that of the sitting-room.

"You *must* see him. You'll never feel that he is really dead if you do not," she whispered, with a ghastly calmness.

And hardly master of himself just then,

Norman followed her quietly into the room, and she closed the door. There, in one corner of the small, darkened apartment, on a mean-looking bed, lay all that was left of Louis Wilmot, still enough now, dead and ghastly. The sight must have roused Norman, for he staggered slightly, and with the stern reproach, “Why do you bring me here ?” would have turned to leave the room, but Eleanor held his arm.

“ You *shall* look at him, Norman Ashleigh,” she whispered ; “ he was your enemy, and he is dead ! ”

And some strange fascination did impel Norman to draw near and look at the insensible clay, so still now, of him who had been so restless in life. Side by side Norman and Eleanor gazed at the dead. Louis Wilmot must have been wretchedly worn and dissipated when death overtook him, and the shrunken face contrasted terribly with the clustering black hair falling round it on the pillow. There was a deep purple mark on the left temple, and Eleanor pointed to it.

“ He was brought home to me in this state last night,” and she shuddered visibly. “ He

had been drinking with some of his gambling companions, and he fell down some stone steps and was dead before they got him home. There was an inquest this morning."

Norman heard her dreamily, but did not speak or look at her, for a horrible fascination seemed to rivet his eyes on the bed.

And Violet had loved that man! But the poor, pale corpse could not rouse the hatred in Norman's refined, noble nature which would have been excited if he had met Louis Wilmot again in life. There was even a feeling of pity for the unfortunate man whom such an awful death had overtaken, mingled with horror and bewilderment in Norman's heart, as now, after his long absence from England, he found himself here with Eleanor in her miserable lodgings, without knowing as yet why she had brought him here, what had occurred during his absence, or how she had come to be the wife of his enemy, who lay in death's sleep before them.

"He is really dead, you see, Mr. Ashleigh," Eleanor said at last, and she replaced the white handkerchief over her dead husband's face with a womanly gentleness, strange in one of her nature towards one she had hated.

But he was dead, and could never be cruel or unkind to her again.

Together they left the room, she and Norman.

“I promised not to detain you here long,” she said. “I have only now to tell you what I asked you to come here for,” and once more within the sitting-room, Eleanor shut the door, and they sat down, with the table between them.

In spite of himself, there was a feverish eagerness in Norman’s heart to hear what she was going to say. If it were of Violet’s death he was about to hear, any dying message of repentance she had left him, he told himself he should listen unmoved, and surely Eleanor must know that such news as that could not affect him. Better for one so weak and false-natured to be taken away before she could deceive others as she had deceived him. Best for herself as well as others, Norman said to himself.

But why did he seem to meet again the gaze of those beautiful eyes, so soft, so truthful in expression, why that strange yearning in his heart towards Violet, the “little Violet” he had known and loved, a feeling as though

she were dead, instead of having become what he had discovered her to be?

“Mr. Ashleigh,” and Eleanor’s strange, hollow laugh grated upon Norman more than ever after what they had just looked upon together, “you would have given me your hand when we met in the street just now. You’ll hardly want to do so when you are leaving me, I think.”

“Mrs. Wilmot, I am sorry to appear rude,” said Norman coldly, “but my time will not permit me to remain very long with you, and I shall be much obliged if you will tell me at once what you say it is so important I should hear,” and there was the faintest possible curl on Norman’s lip as he spoke.

“You see it is such a very easy, pleasant confession I am going to make to you, Mr. Ashleigh, that you will surely forgive me for having delayed it as long as possible.”

Norman was not looking at her; he was slightly turned away from her, and his head rested on his hand, so that he did not see the hard, despairing look that fixed itself on Eleanor’s white face as she grasped the table with crossed hands and bent her eyes upon them.

“More than a year and three months ago, when you were in Alexandria, Mr. Ashleigh, you had a letter from me, enclosing one which you saw, was from Violet to Louis Wilmot, had you not?”

“Why do you speak of this, Mrs. Wilmot?” and Norman’s face was still turned from her. “You must have known I received the letter, by what took place afterwards.”

Then firmly, but in a tone scarcely above a whisper, Eleanor went on,—

“I speak of it because that letter was *not* written by Violet. She was *wholly* innocent of it. It was a forgery. Both the composition of the letter and the writing were Louis Wilmot’s. The sending of it and the rest, I undertook, as you know.”

Eleanor paused, and raising her eyes, looked across at Norman with a quick, eager glance. He was not turned from her now; he was looking at her with a gaze which, calm as she appeared, she could not bear, and she at once took away her eyes from his face.

“Are you mad, Eleanor Gordon, to tell me this?” broke from Norman, almost fiercely, in an agony of suspense.

“ Mad ! no, I don’t think so,” she replied, and that terrible cough again interrupted her, its hollow sound coming to Norman like a plea for mercy from one who must surely be very soon with the dead. “ Will you have patience, Mr. Ashleigh, for a while longer, while I tell you all ? for there is much you must hear, and it may be a long story ; but I will keep you no longer than I can help, for my very presence must be hateful to you now, though you are too gentlemanly to curse me openly.”

“ Tell me why *you* injured us, why *you* as well as Louis Wilmot hated the sight of our happiness ? ” and Norman’s words came slowly, as though it were an effort to speak at all in the confusion of thoughts that were well-nigh driving him mad.

Bewilderment and a joy almost too great, an agony of remorse and pain harrowing his very soul, an indignation fearful in intensity, and the strain of a wretched suspense, all overwhelming him together, and he must sit here quietly while he listened to Eleanor’s confession ! What if Violet were dead ! And Norman felt that until now he had hardly known what real agony was, and

the idea of such a probability brought to his mind with living force the reality of a despair which could have power to make him take his own life, in its madness. If he could *only* live over again that day on which such a monstrous deception had been so successfully practised on him, it seemed to Norman, now in his enlightenment, that he must have divined the deception, that his very love and trust must have suggested it to him, and yet they had not done so ! His pride and jealousy had blinded him to everything but the evidence of his eyes, which imagined a proof so convincing as to leave no loophole for a doubt, Violet's own handwriting, as it seemed to him, even him, who knew and loved it so well. He who knew every turn, every letter of it, had been duped by a skilful imitation ! It was a terrible moment, this, for Norman's pride ; but the wound it suffered was hardly felt, in the stronger, more overwhelming emotions which were crushing his heart with their weight. And he must remain here quietly, until Eleanor had told him all, clearing up much that was yet dark to him !

“ Then you will not wait ? ” was Eleanor's answer to his enquiry. “ You must know at

once why *I* too hated to see your happiness, why *I* helped Louis Wilmot in his revenge. I ought to be ashamed to tell you, I ought to blush at making such an unwomanly admission; but I am past that now, and very soon it will matter very little what you or others think of me. It was because I *loved* you, Norman Ashleigh, and that is what I could never say of anyone else in the world. It was a selfish love, if you like, but still it was love, and you were wholly unconscious and careless of it. You thought me cold and stony, and perhaps I *was*, but not to *you*. You likened me to a statue, a thing without life, incapable of feeling. You did. You spoke of me in those terms to—to Violet, whom I had always despised; but you did not know that your evil genius, Louis Wilmot, overheard you and took care that I should be quickly informed of your flattering opinion, for *he* had discovered my secret, if you did not. It must have been from that moment I began to hate you, or rather to wonder at times whether I loved or hated you most. You see I had been brought up to think that whatever I wished for should at once be mine, and it was not to be borne that that which

I longed for with a feverish desire, never felt before, should be the one thing denied me. I might have been a good woman if you had loved me, Norman Ashleigh. I knew that, I felt it, for, selfish as I was, there *was* *some* good in my nature originally, though my education had buried it down so very much out of sight. But you were indifferent, supremely so, and all better feelings went out of me entirely, except the remnant which perhaps gives me strength to confess all to you before it is too late, and even that is perhaps only a selfish remorse, you will say. For my nature is not a generous one, like hers, like your injured Violet's. It is not my fault that, if I were in her place, I should find it almost impossible to forgive you for that cruel letter you wrote, even on hearing how shamefully, how convincingly you were duped."

Eleanor paused, and as Norman glanced at her, she looked so mockingly, so recklessly calm, that he turned away with a disgust he could not master, blushing for her who could not blush for herself.

"Then—Violet—is living?" was his enquiry, in his agonizing suspense.

“We have not met or heard of each other for three months; but *then* she was living, with my mother, as usual.”

A terrible sigh of relief escaped Norman, terrible because of the tale it told of the suffering and dread of the last few minutes. And now, until he had heard all, he must remain inactive, in his wild, restless longing. And sweet, saving hope whispered that she must be living still! His darling, she could not be dead in those three short months, gone where his pleadings for forgiveness could not reach her with any avail, where he could not surround her with his life-long love and repentance!

Norman buried his face in his hands again, and listened to Eleanor as she continued,—

“From the first, Louis Wilmot saw how it was with me, and *I* saw as others did, that *he* was seeking Violet for her money. And I knew he would never forgive you for standing between him and his prize, for I suspected too that he was not in such easy circumstances as he led everyone to believe, and as it was known he had been left in by his father. I need not tell you now of the thousand ways in which he delighted to let me see he knew

my secret and to make me feel thereby somehow in his power. He was odious to me, and yet when Violet came back to London to us, I made use of him partly to be revenged on her; and there was a tacit understanding between us that he should visit us very often, so that both of us should be gratified by her annoyance and distress at his persistent politeness to her. She used to escape whenever she could; but that evening you came in so unexpectedly and found her singing with Louis Wilmot bending over her was a very sweet moment to me and her tormentor. You did not know how hard she had tried to escape from her position, and we saw your painful look of displeasure the moment you entered, and we knew the seeds of jealousy had entered your heart. It matters little now whether we were right; but when you and 'Violet left the room, Louis whispered my own conviction to me, that your interview would not be entirely of a pleasant nature."

An exclamation of pain here escaped Norman, wrung from him by the too vivid recollection of that evening, when he had wounded the generous, trusting heart that so loved him, by his hasty suspicion.

“ You left England,” resumed Eleanor, “ but it was not until it was certain you would be detained abroad for an indefinite time that I was convinced Louis Wilmot was plotting something in his own mind and was seeking an opportunity to speak of it to me. Something in his manner assured me of this, and one day, after we had sat alone some time, he very cautiously approached to what he wished to say. It matters little now to tell you how we came fully to an understanding, or of the way in which he succeeded, by his ill concealed sarcasm and hints of an easy method of revenge for me, in rousing my jealousy and hatred afresh, and inflaming my desire to provoke an estrangement between you and Violet, if it were possible. He stung me so at last, that I retaliated by telling him plainly that I knew Violet’s attraction in his eyes was her fortune, and he did not deny it, but grew suddenly very earnest as he asked me plainly whether I would be willing to help him if he showed me a way to work mischief between you and Violet, telling me that he too hated you and the sight of your happiness.

“ How well I remember that moment ! He

allowed me no time to hesitate or pretend to scruples. I must decide one way or the other, and until I consented to associate myself with him in his purpose, he would not unfold it, and if I refused, then he would give it up, as there were circumstances which made my help necessary in it. He knew how safe he was against any refusal, he knew how wholly unable I should be to resist his temptation, after he had worked so upon my pride and jealousy! Odious as he was to me, I could not resist him now, much as it stung my pride to yield so easily and feel how entirely I was in his hands. I gave the fatal consent, and I could not draw back then, indeed I had not the power, fascinated as I was with the idea of vengeance, though I saw how he gloated over my humiliation and easy compliance. Then he told me that he would require me to give him at once all the letters I had ever received from Violet, and any other writing of hers I had, together with a sheet of the note-paper stamped with her initials, which she generally used, for his intention was to write a letter as if from Violet to himself, and I was to send it to you with a letter explaining how it had fallen into

my hands. I was to plan my own letter myself, expressing my sincere sorrow for what I had discovered, and telling you that when in my amazement I had read the letter through almost unconsciously, I felt it my duty at once to enlighten you as to what was going on in your absence. While Louis Wilmot was speaking, I thought he had gone suddenly mad, or was a fool, after all, to make such an absurd proposition, to imagine that he could ever imitate Violet's handwriting so as to deceive *you*. I almost told him so, in scornful anger, for I thought my vision of vengeance had fallen to the ground. He smiled coolly as he replied that he did not wonder at what I said, for he had been wrong in not informing me before that he was *certain* of his scheme proving a success, at least as far as the imitating Violet's handwriting was concerned.

“ ‘It is a gift with me,’ he said, ‘one which I have used frequently for my own amusement, but fortunately I have never mentioned it to anyone in England. I can imitate anyone’s handwriting so perfectly, as to deceive even Norman Ashleigh, clever as you think him.’

“ Those were the very words he used, and even *I* could not but shudder as I listened to

him. But he saw I no longer treated his proposition with ridicule, though I would not appear to be convinced yet that he could really do what he said.

“‘Mr. Wilmot,’ I said, ‘you cannot really think to succeed in deceiving Norman Ashleigh so completely that he will not *suspect* at least the genuineness of the letter you will write, knowing, as you do, his entire faith in Violet and his love for her.’

“The answer he gave me proved to be a true surmise, Mr. Ashleigh,” and Eleanor paused a moment to look at her auditor, but his face was still buried in his hands.

“‘Norman Ashleigh has the pride of Lucifer, Louis Wilmot said to me, ‘and his jealousy and anger will be proportionate when fully roused; besides, he *must* believe the evidence of his own eyes, which, search as they may, will discover only Violet Mortimer’s writing in the letter you will enclose to him.’

“He would say no more then, and at once I gave up to him all I had of Violet’s writing, with a promise to have a sheet of her note-paper ready for him by the next evening. He left me feeling strangely bewildered, only half realizing what we were going to do, and won-

dering why he seemed to think so little of the risk we ran and the explanation that was sure to ensue between you and Violet. That evening, while Violet was engaged with my mother, I abstracted the paper from her desk and concealed it in my own. I ought to tell you that just then my mother was confined to bed, and Violet never came down to Mr. Wilmot when he called. She might have noticed how long he remained alone with me when he called now, but, fortunately for us, she was too much occupied with other thoughts. He came again as he had promised, the next evening, and after I had assured him we were in no danger of being disturbed, he drew out a piece of paper containing a written copy of some verses, and I started, for the writing was Violet's, and yet I knew it was *not* hers, but Louis Wilmot's.

“‘But I must *see* you do it,’ I said, and I locked the drawing-room door to prevent our being suddenly disturbed, and he wrote a few lines with one of Violet's letters before him, and I could not have distinguished a letter of the writing from hers. I put away the writing materials and unlocked the door, and

then he read me a copy of the letter which you eventually received.

“‘ Louis Wilmot,’ I said, when he had finished, ‘ you are a demon.’

“‘ That is all the better for our present purpose,’ he said coolly.

“‘ But,’ I said, ‘ you don’t believe that even that letter can cause a permanent estrangement between Violet and Mr. Ashleigh? Do you think she will not write to clear herself; and when he returns, what shall we have gained? Only to be exposed by him in his indignation! Louis Wilmot, you must be mad! ’ I said again, but he replied,—

“‘ If you fear Norman Ashleigh’s anger, I do not. And don’t you understand,’ he said, ‘ that he need never suspect that you were leagued with me.’

“ Then he went on to tell me that, happen what might, I was to persist that I had found the letter as I told you, and that I knew nothing more of what had been going on than it showed me, though I had perhaps suspected all was not right. And for his part, he was ready to swear, if you asked him, that he had really received that letter from Violet, and even to reproach her in your

presence, for denying she had written it as well as others,—which of course he could produce as he had that one,—to reproach her with her guilty weakness in deserting him, through fear of your anger and because once more under the influence of your presence. He told me your anger could not affect him; you were not likely, he said, to take any revenge which could harm him materially, and for your opinion of him or what you might cause others to think of him he cared nothing.

“ ‘Besides,’ he said, ‘he can never be *sure* that I wrote the letter, at least he will have no proof, unless you and I confess all; and I think you will agree that that is not very probable.’

“ How could you guess, he asked me, that he possessed the art which I now knew him to possess, so perfectly as only to have been rendered easy by constant practice. When he spoke in this strain, I felt convinced that he had made his questionable acquirement useful at some previous period of his life, but he enlightened me no more then.

“ Norman Ashleigh may believe Violet Mortimer’s word, and his own conviction will

be that she *could* not be false to him,' he then said; 'he may think himself convinced that the letter was entirely the production of my revenge; he will of course marry Violet Mortimer, and they will both imagine for a time that their happiness is fully restored and secured. But I know Norman Ashleigh too well, much as he despises me, to be afraid that my revenge will end there. His peace of mind will *never* come back to him, though he will fancy it has at first. With his haughty, exclusive nature and jealousy of his wife's lightest word, that letter will ever remain as a constant, condemning proof against her, rising up between them like a phantom, much as he will fight against his unwilling distrust and hate himself for it. When they are happiest, this shadow will ever be between them, even though he may forget it at times or treat it as madness. Without wishing it, he will make himself miserable, and his wife more so, by his suspicion, which she will perceive only too quickly, loving him as she does. She will be shocked to think that he is capable of distrusting her, and he will be equally so at himself, without being able to prevent his

tormenting doubts. He will always fancy, with his sensitive disposition, that there must have been *something* wrong in his wife's conduct in the past, *some* levity or thoughtlessness during his absence, which emboldened me to try to ruin her completely in his estimation by the writing of that letter which he will only have her word for disbelieving. He will torment himself with doubts hateful to him, he will recall every word she ever spoke favourable to me in the past, which at the time he thought nothing of. Nothing short of hearing the whole truth from you or me will ever restore his full peace of mind, and we shall be amply revenged on Violet Mortimer too, for her position will not be an enviable one.'

"You see, Mr. Ashleigh, Louis Wilmot was prepared for everything; but if it had not been for your pride and exclusiveness, which revealed to him your character so well, he would never have counted so safely on the success of his experiment, at least on its partial success, if it failed in entirely separating you and Violet. I have told you almost word for word what he said, but he added that he had strong hopes that on

being convinced of Violet's falsehood, you would at once renounce her and remain abroad, perhaps hardly telling her fully what you had discovered against her, particularly if I requested you to keep from her who was your informant."

Eleanor paused again, for Norman had started painfully on hearing the last sentence. But he soon calmed himself again, for it was necessary he should hear *everything* she had to say, as Violet must hear it all from him later.

"You know what followed," Eleanor continued, her voice weaker now as though from speaking so long. "We sent the letter to you, and its consequences were such as we had hardly dared to hope for."

Then she told Norman how it had happened that she had read his letter to Violet and had become of necessity her confidante. She spoke forcibly but briefly of Violet's agony and the terrible shock she had suffered. Norman knew it all too well to need her description. Then she went on to tell him that what she and Louis Wilmot had dreaded most of all had come to pass: Violet had determined to let her love and faith triumph

over her pride and write herself to Norman ; and Eleanor related too how she had feigned to give her sincere help and sympathy to Violet.

“ She wrote to you, Mr. Ashleigh, and I knew that if her letter reached you, the chief part of our revenge was foiled. I felt desperate, and I determined to get the letter into my hands. I could but try, so I told her she must give it me to post, as I was going out, while she was wanted by my mother. I told her with feigned earnestness that she would be happier when once her letter was posted, and, little suspecting what she was doing, she gave it to me, and even *I* felt a pang of reproach in my heart at the sight of her confidence ; but I thought of my own love turned into hate, and I was firm again. You never got that letter, for I never posted it. That evening Louis Wilmot and I opened it and read it, and he would then have destroyed it at once had there been a fire at hand. But there was not, and I kept the letter, feigning to him afterwards that I had burnt it, but I had not, for something restrained me from doing it. I hardly knew what, for I little thought then ever to confess

all this to you ; but I have the letter yet, and can give it to you before you leave me."

Norman had raised his head, and pushing back the hair from his brow with an impatient gesture, he looked straight at Eleanor, and, reckless as she was, she quailed before the gaze, so withering in its indignation, of those deep grey eyes.

"Eleanor Gordon !" he said, and his voice trembled with terrible emotion, "you may obtain pardon from Heaven for what you have done, but *I* can *never* forgive you !"

For there was an agony in Norman's heart just then almost like that of death, and again he hid his face from Eleanor's gaze.

"I am not going to ask you to forgive me," she said, "for I could not do it in your place. What would your forgiveness do for me now ? I should hate it, I tell you. I choose to unburden myself of my guilt because I shall die easier, and there is just enough of good left in me to make me care to repair what I have done, because I have found how little, after the first, the wreck of your happiness satisfied me."

Then she went on to tell him briefly of the days that had followed, when Violet wa

looking for his letter, and of her agony on receiving none, only her own letters and presents.

“ She did show me them, of course; but when I asked her if she had a letter from you, she replied, ‘ No,’ and said that all her own were returned to her, but that a slip of paper informed her that the last had been destroyed. Did that mean the one you received from her by the same post as the forged one I sent ? ”

Norman made a gesture of assent.

“ I thought so, and she cannot have looked fully through the package, or she would have missed it. She of course thought you referred to her letter of appeal which I had intercepted; she thought it was *that* you had destroyed in your scorn and disbelief.”

Then Norman heard all that had followed, of Violet’s silent suffering and untold anguish, for though Eleanor could not be quite certain on this point, she at least strongly suspected that Violet had at first told nothing, even to Mrs. Arnott and Nelly Woodford. And of her dangerous illness and nearness to death Norman heard too with a feeling like madness and a wild thanksgiving in his heart that he

had not to listen to what would have driven him to despair, the account of her death.

“ You must thank Mrs. Arnott that she recovered, Mr. Ashleigh. But for her influence and sustaining presence Violet would have died in her utter prostration under the blow that had fallen on her. You stayed abroad, and Louis Wilmot and I were amply revenged. But there were times when, hardened as I was, the sight of Violet’s silent suffering was almost too great a reproach to me. I saw that she had received a wound from which she would never recover, that even *she* could never forgive the insult she thought you had offered her by scorning the letter she had laid aside her pride to write to you, and by refusing even to tell her what you had believed against her. I think she must have suspected Louis Wilmot of having been in some way the cause of her trouble, for I used to see her shudder at his very name, and she avoided him more than ever. And all this time I was feigning sisterly friendship for her, and she was growing to like me and feel confidence in me. And there were times when I felt I *could not* hate her, that I must even grow to love her after a

fashion, for I had never believed till now how strong and deep her nature was, and she attracted my admiration and pity so much more than if she had passed her days in tears and lamentations or reproaches against you. For she never did reproach you, *never*. I remember once that I mentioned your name with pretended indignation and contempt, and I have never forgotten the look she gave me as she begged me not to speak of you at all. So I saw that however she felt towards you herself, she would never let others speak against you to her. But even in my moments of relenting, I never dared think of giving up my revenge and confessing the truth. I *dared not*, I tell you, much as it galled me to know that I was afraid of Louis Wilmot and his vengeance, and how completely I had let myself be swayed by him."

Eleanor paused a few seconds and then continued,—

"Is your patience exhausted, Mr. Ashleigh? I shall not detain you much longer now, but you *must* hear all, even to how I came to marry Louis Wilmot, for it is our last meeting, and you will have to tell *all* I have said to my mother and Violet, for they

know nothing of *why* I married as I did. During Violet's illness, Louis Wilmot had told me that if she recovered, he intended renewing the offer of marriage he had made her at Windermere, and which he had previously spoken of to me. He was aware that he had little chance of success, but he could not deny himself the pleasure of trying, and if in a moment of wounded pride at the thought of your treatment of her, and as a way of hiding her suffering and desolation from the world, she should after all accept him, how great would be his triumph! But such an act was not in Violet's nature, and though he knew this as well as I did, he persisted in making a last attempt to win a wealthy wife and crown his revenge upon you. I have told you we went away as soon as Violet was well enough, and on the first opportunity—after our return, one evening when he found her alone, Louis Wilmot renewed his proposal to her, and when next I saw him he told me all that had passed."

And Eleanor related to Norman what Mr. Wilmot had told her, of Violet's indignant refusal, and of the wild reproach she had suffered to escape her in a moment of anguish

when she had seemed to forget everything but her conviction that it was Louis Wilmot who had in some way injured her with Norman, and of the answer she had received, every word tearing Norman's heart afresh. Could he *ever* forgive himself for having been so duped, so blinded? Could he *ever* make her, his darling, forget all she had suffered? Would not life be too short to repay her for all, to blot out the memory of those cruel, stern reproaches he had written to her in his blindness?

“It was about three weeks or a fortnight after Violet had refused him,” Eleanor continued, “that Louis Wilmot called one day, and after a minute’s talk alone with me, he suddenly asked me to marry him, in very few words, without any protestations of affection. I was too surprised to answer at first, but at last I spoke, giving him a scornful and decided refusal, though I felt somehow that I should not escape at once, so easily. He was paler than ever, as he asked me with a horrid smile, ‘if I did not know *why* he wanted me and why I *must* marry him, if he chose, now that Violet had again rejected him.’

“Then I knew at once what he meant, and how entirely I was in his power, since I had been associated with him in his vengeance. It was a hard struggle to conceal my dread of him, as I told him that it was my fortune he wanted, small as it was, and I asked him if he were really in such a strait that, having looked for so great a prize as Violet’s money would have been to him, he could deign to come down and ask me for mine.

“‘Yes,’ he replied, ‘and I mean to have it too. You and I, Miss Gordon, ought to understand each other by this time, so that I need not mind giving you a little of my confidence,’ and he smiled sneeringly again, until he nearly maddened me.

“Then he told me that at the time he first visited Mrs. Lester, and met you and Violet, he had little more than fifty pounds a year left out of the fortune his father left him. He acknowledged coolly that he had been very extravagant abroad, and had been in the habit of gambling, which soon reduced his income to one tenth of what it had been when he became possessed of it. The evening he first met Violet at Mr. Arnott’s, he told me he did not notice

her until Mrs. Lester happened to tell him she was an heiress, and gave him a little of her history, and from that moment he determined to win her for his wife. He told me he had returned to England in hopes of getting a rich wife, for he was little inclined to work, and with his habits and tastes he could never live on the remnant of his fortune. He hated you from the first, he said, for he saw in you a dangerous rival. He felt triumphant when you went away to India; but he soon perceived how firm Violet was going to be in her repulse of his advances, and he was often furious at such treatment from one whom he considered a child, and who, he doubtless thought, ought to be highly flattered by the attentions of so fascinating a man as himself. But he knew you were sure to remain away some time, and so, fearing to render himself odious to Violet, he went away too, with a secret resolution to return in due course and renew his pursuit of her. If, however, he had come across anyone else who suited him equally in point of wealth, Violet would never have been tormented by his presence again. But he did not, he told me, and he returned with a firmer resolve

than ever to win Violet, on hearing from his unsuspecting cousin that you were still away. You know what followed: how eagerly he must have accepted the invitation to Windermere, when he and Violet would be for some time under the same roof. He proposed to her, as you know, and from that moment he resolved to be revenged on her for her dislike of him, and on you for so easily winning the girl he had troubled himself to pretend to love, only to be finally rejected. But it was not until you had again to leave England, he told me, that he saw his way to try and ruin your happiness, and knowing my secret as he did, and guessing, too, that I also dreamt of revenge, he resolved to turn his knowledge to account, and make me help him, as I have told you. I little suspected at the time that he had another object in view besides his revenge, as he now told me plainly he had had. It was to place me in his power completely, and he now gave me the alternative of marrying him, or the certainty of the exposure of my guilty share of his successful scheme against you and Violet.

“‘ You have two hundred a year,’ he said to me, ‘ and unless I become possessed of it

by marrying you, I shall soon be reduced to beggary.'

"He then told me that a sum of money he had lately won by gambling would be swallowed up in payment of his debts, so that he would soon be almost destitute, relying solely on his fortune in betting or at the gambling table."

"'I cannot wait now,' he said, 'to hope to win a rich wife. My acquaintances among ladies of wealth are few, and situated as I am, I am little likely to make any more, with any good results. Your fortune, small as it is, is a certain thing; we could neither of us exactly starve on it, and I tell you I *shall* be in danger of starving or getting into jail if I do not secure it. So I give you your choice, either marry me and help me to keep up appearances, or make up your mind that on the day you definitely refuse me, I shall take my revenge on *you* too. I care nothing for Norman Ashleigh's anger, or the opinion of anyone I know, and I shall inform both him and all who know both of us of the fraud you and I have practised on him. Violet Mortimer will never marry me, so let her marry him. I care nothing now for my useless

revenge, unless it serves my interests materially. I shall then leave the country and seek my fortune elsewhere. But *you* cannot do that so easily ; you are only a woman, and you cannot shake off your guilt with so little trouble. Your life will be a pleasant one, truly, looked on with horror by your friends as you will be, and worse than all by him you loved ; or, if you fly from it all, what will you do, where can you go, a girl like you, used to luxuries and constant gaiety and indulgence, what would it be, the lonely life you would lead ? And you would never know the day that I might trouble you again, perhaps to take a more speedy revenge. You know I can do all this, you know I mean what I say, so will you have me for your husband or not, Eleanor Gordon ?'

"I remember every word as if he had just uttered it, Mr. Ashleigh. I married him, and do you wonder at me ? He was right ; I am only a woman, and I had become a sad coward since he had acquired his hateful influence over me. I had fancied at times that I could confess all and cast my burdensome secret from me ; but until now I had never thought of the consequences and the

dreadful shame, and I could not face them. I will not weary you with all I endured during the period before my marriage, when I had to appear happy, or at least careless. I used to feel capable of murdering Louis Wilmot sometimes, but for the cowardice which made me shrink from death and disgrace, even in my misery. I knew I was going to enter on a life of humiliation and poverty, but I was powerless to escape from it, for I should only have exchanged it for shame still more certain. We were married, and if you knew one-half of the polished insults and humiliations which were heaped on me when all was outwardly so fair to the world, you would feel amply revenged, Mr. Ashleigh, for what I have made you suffer. I used to wonder sometimes if an evil spirit bodily possessed my husband, for he seemed to take more delight in witnessing my powerless misery and bitter degradation than he had ever done in the success of his scheme against you. And it was my miserable pittance of a fortune that had cost me all this ! But then Louis Wilmot had been desperate and had grasped eagerly at what would have seemed poverty to him when he had promised

himself Violet for a wife. He would not take a house, as my mother urged him to do, and I knew he still gambled, but was ignorant to what extent. I used to wonder what would become of me if we had children, for I knew he would trouble himself little about me when he had squandered my money. I asked him this one day that I was nearly desperate, and he told me sneeringly that it was a pity I had not thought of that before, and that I had not had more penetration at the time he asked me to associate myself with him in his revenge upon you. He used to be furious at anything he considered expensive in our way of living ; but I knew he feasted and drank when he was out, on whatever he won by his gambling, for *I* never got a penny of his winnings. We had been married six months when the crash came that I had expected. He came home one day and told me that we were beggars, that he had lost a large sum of money which he could never pay, and that the man to whom he owed it was *determined* to have payment. We left our lodgings at once, and this is the third place to which we have removed since, to avoid being discovered. I hardly know how we

have lived. My husband occasionally won paltry sums whenever he ventured into gamblers' society, and I have had to support myself by sewing or any fancy-work I could get, for he drank with all the money he gained. My mother has advertised, begging me to let her know something of me; but my husband knew that she would never consent to give a penny towards *his* support, so he refused even to let me write to her, but indeed I did not wish to do so. I would not have returned home for worlds; reduced and changed as I was, I could not bear the idea of ever being seen again by anyone I had known before. He saw I was falling into a consumption, and he was glad, I knew, for he was always afraid of my leaving him and perhaps giving information which would lead to his discovery by the person to whom he owed so much money. Every penny of what he got with me was gone when we had not been married much more than six months. Latterly I have had to support him as well as myself and to pay for our wretched lodgings, which are the cheapest we could find. But the little work I have got has hardly sufficed, and I have been nearly starving more than

once, for he never dreamt of trying to get employment. I hardly ever go out, except to look for work, and we came here because it is so far from Westford House, and I am not likely to meet anyone I know about here. Oh ! you have been well avenged, Mr. Ashleigh ! For some time I have *longed* to confess all, to have disclosed the guilt in which I had a share for which I have paid so heavily ; I have been more than once on the point of writing it all to Violet, not knowing where *you* were, for it could not have brought heavier humiliation on me than I had already, but I never dared to carry out my intention, for fear of my husband. He had told me many a time that he cared nothing now for seeing you and Violet separated ; but he would have been furious if he discovered that *I* had taken on myself to confess our guilt. He still liked to think of the forged letter as ever standing between you and your peace of mind, and if he had come in (and I never knew when I was safe from him) and found me writing to Violet or my mother, I am convinced he would have murdered me, and almost desperate as I was, I was afraid to die. I clung to life, though I have known for some

time how short mine will be. Louis Wilmot had effectually succeeded in crushing my spirit and making me afraid of him, and I believe he delighted in seeing my horror of him and the passive apathy which made me shrink from the exertion of escaping from him and braving his vengeance, which I knew would follow me. He told me lately that he was going to satisfy my curiosity as to whether he had ever before used his power of forging other persons' handwriting. A short time previous to his first return to England he had, he told me, forged the signature of an Italian gentleman of his acquaintance to a cheque for a large amount, which he was successful in obtaining, and it was preparatory to doing this that he had been in the habit of practising constantly and variously when he was alone and secure from intrusion, so as to ensure success. But he was in constant expectation that the gentleman would discover how he had been defrauded, and of course be positive he had never given him his signature for such a large amount, so he came to England to be out of the way and to look out for a rich wife. It gave him pleasure to see me shudder at this additional revelation, knowing

my powerlessness, if even I had not been his wife, to inform against him, ignorant as I was of names and places, which of course he concealed from me. For the last week he had been ill and mostly confined to bed, until yesterday, when he went out, taking with him a sovereign I tried to hide, and last night, about ten o'clock, he was brought home dead, as I have told you."

A fictitious strength seemed to have enabled Eleanor to speak so long, for now that her self-appointed task was so nearly finished, her voice grew very weak and faint, and she rested her head on her hand, thoroughly exhausted, and the hollow cough again shook her wasted frame.

"I have nothing more to tell you now, Mr. Ashleigh," she said at last; "I am sorry to have detained you so long, for you must be anxious to be gone out of my presence. But one thing I must request of you, and that is, to tell every word you can remember of what I have told you to my mother and to anyone else who may have thought ill of you or Violet on knowing of your separation. I have done very little good in my life, and it may be well for myself if before I die I

can repair the injury I have done to you and Violet. Miserable and degraded as I am, I am afraid to face death after the life I have led.” And she shuddered. “ You will never be troubled with even hearing of me again after to-day. My mother will perhaps wish to come to me, for she *did* love me, though if it had not been for the education and whole bringing up she gave me, I should not have been reduced to this. But she *must* not come. I do not wish to see her or anyone; the sight of me so changed would only do my mother harm. Call up all your own disgust for me to prevent her seeking me.”

Norman had risen and was looking down at Eleanor. What a wreck she was, morally and physically! She had injured him in a manner which he had told her he could *never* forgive, and she would have been the cause of his life-long despair if Violet had died during his absence; it was owing to her that Violet was still suffering under an insult to her womanly pride and loving faith, which, as it at present stood, must seem impossible ever to forget. But, in the midst of the abhorrence he could not but feel for Eleanor, there was mingled a strange compassion for

one whom he remembered in all her pride and beauty ; he even felt strong indignation for the refined cruelty she had received from her husband, who had been ten times more his enemy still than herself, and whose victim she had been. And it was not in Norman's nature to address utterly useless reproaches to a woman, one too who was dying, and was so helpless and wretched. It may have been the words "I might have been a good woman if you had loved me" which appealed too to Norman's heart, even while he blushed for her who could utter them.

Abhorrent as she was to him, and impossible as it was for him to tell her he forgave her, he yet could not leave her thus, without (if it were possible to do so without rousing her indignation) asking her if he could do anything to assist her in at least her present necessity, which must be urgent and pressing. He knew how bitterly such an enquiry, coming from him, might wound her pride, unless indeed it were all crushed out of her ; but in a need like hers, he must not hesitate on that account.

" It shall be as you ask," he said, " as far

as necessary; but I am sorry you should think me capable of trying to excite your mother's abhorrence against you," and he paused for a moment. "Mrs. Wilmot," he added as gently as possible, "you must pardon me for asking you if I can assist you in any way, and for insisting on doing so, if I can. Perhaps you will resent my request, but the present is no time for useless pride—"

"I understand you, Mr. Ashleigh," she interrupted, rising from her seat and looking him steadily in the face, "and I suppose I ought to thank you for your generosity to one who has wronged you as I have, when you ought rather to curse me openly. But I have told you I do not want your forgiveness; still less do I want your charity. Perhaps I owe it to you to tell you that I have sufficient to bury my husband, and then I shall work as I have done before. Don't you know," she added, with a faint colour rising to her face and a touch of fierceness in her manner, "that I'd rather *die* than ever accept charity from *you*, though you may be right in saying that I have no right to have any pride left!"

Then she took from her pocket a small sheet of paper on which a few lines were written, and gave it to Norman.

“If you give that to Violet first, it may be easier for her to consent to listen to you,” she said; “I wrote it this morning, intending to tell her all now that my tyrant is dead. I have no need to add anything more to it now, but you can give it to her.”

Norman glanced at it and read on it a few lines in which Eleanor stated briefly the fraud practised by Louis Wilmot and herself with such success. She had broken off suddenly, intending to finish her letter later.

While Norman was reading, Eleanor went and unlocked an old, worn writing-desk, and produced from one of its recesses a letter which she silently handed to him. Norman knew at once what it was, for the envelope, with broken seal and without postage mark, was addressed to himself at Alexandria in Violet’s handwriting. Almost forgetting Eleanor’s presence, he at once took out the letter and read Violet’s appeal to his faith and love, her earnest request that he would at least tell her of what he accused her, her reproaches for his cruel distrust; he read the letter,

which, if it had reached him at the time, would have caused the truth to flash upon his mind, or at least have made him, in his firm trust in her truth, at once confront or communicate with her accusers and demand a full explanation. Eleanor sat down, and with clasped hands watched the terrible emotion on Norman's features as he read Violet's letter.

“I loved him!” she thought, “and because he was indifferent to me I have made him hate me! I wonder how he keeps from cursing me!”

“Mr. Ashleigh,” she said, aloud, “why don't you go? I have no more to say.”

He looked up quickly and their eyes met, but directly she turned away again and seemed as if waiting for him to go without further adieu. He looked at her for a moment longer, and then silently left the room. With that letter of Violet's in his possession, with that agonizing emotion in his heart, he was incapable of uttering a word of farewell to Eleanor. If it had been only himself she had injured, he could have forgiven her; but he could *never* forgive the wrong, the cruel insult suffered by Violet,

his darling, who might have been his wife all this time. In what words could he ask her forgiveness, how repair all she had suffered? There was a strange confusion in Norman's mind as he found himself out of Eleanor's presence and in the shop below. It was as though he feared to wake from the dream of renewed love and happiness which had just opened to him again!

He addressed a few enquiries to the woman, who evidently wondered what had kept him upstairs so long, and she informed him that Mrs. Wilmot could not possibly support herself much longer, adding that though she was sorry for her, she could scarcely afford to let her remain in her apartments rent free. Norman at once gave her all the money he had about him, extracting a promise from her that she would keep Mrs. Wilmot undisturbed for a certain time longer, without saying at whose instance it was that she did so. Evidently surprised, the woman promised what he required, and Norman took down her address, and was soon in the street again, on his way to his hotel, scarcely seeing or hearing anything he passed on his way, conscious only of his own over-

whelming thoughts. It was drawing near evening, but though the distance from his hotel to Westford House was rather long, he must go there at once, to-night. Immediately on reaching his room he penned a short note to Violet, his hand trembling as he wrote, asking her to see him, in words which must show her how important it was she should do so, for he knew that if he merely sent his name to her without anything more, she would refuse to see him. A visit to her from him, even if it were to solicit forgiveness, could only seem an insult, in her ignorance of all that he had just learnt.

Dinner had been prepared for him, but he left it untasted, in his agitation, for how could he delay going to seek Violet, even for an hour? He walked, however, all the way to Westford House, feeling that the exercise calmed him somewhat and gave him time to prepare himself for what was coming. Would he find Violet at home—would he find her well, and all going on as Eleanor had left it? The suspense was almost too much for him to bear with outward calmness as he went along. There was a wild, impatient desire within him to clasp his darling to his heart

again, to see the loving eyes look up to him once more ; but how much remained to do before he could hear her speak the words of reconciliation and forgiveness ! For even though he had been so duped as to give him no room to doubt of Violet's falsehood, it was not in his nature to forgive himself on that account. He had caused bitter, terrible suffering to her he loved and who loved him, who was all the world to him, and though he had acted in blindness, his agony must be keen and long before he could cease to reproach himself.

At last, in less than an hour, Norman stood on the doorstep of Westford House, feeling as though in a trembling dream, and in another minute his suspense was ended. Yes, Mrs. Mortimer lived here still ; but she and Miss Mortimer were both away from home at present, was the answer to Norman's enquiry. They had been away for the last three weeks, the servant said, and she did not know when they were to return. The girl was not one Norman knew ; she had come since Violet's illness to Westford House, and perhaps it was easier for him to appear calm before her on that account. He asked

her if she could tell him where they were gone.

"It is somewhere in the north, sir," she replied, "and if you will come in a moment, I can get to know from the cook, for she had a note from Miss Mortimer yesterday to say they are not coming home as soon as they expected," and she showed Norman into the sitting room he knew so well, everything in it seeming to speak of Violet.

What had her thoughts been when last she sat here? Was it not here that she had burnt the letters he had returned to her, as Eleanor had told him? Must it not have been here she had sat every day, before her illness, shivering in that unnatural cold, under the shock that had fallen upon her?

The servant's entrance roused Norman from his painful reverie. She had Violet's note in her hand, and gave it to Norman that he might see the address at the head of it. He only kept it in his hand a moment, to be certain of the address, and at the first glance, saw written,—

" ROSE COTTAGE,
MORTON,
NEAR N—,
CUMBERLAND."

She was with Mrs. Arnott then! She had gone, ignorant of how soon he would return to Ashleigh Court.

“Thank you,” he said, as he prepared to leave the house; “I am sorry for troubling you, but I wished particularly to know where they were.”

The girl assured him it was no trouble, and, rendered very civil by Norman’s handsome looks and gentlemanly hearing, she informed him that the reason stated in the note for her mistress’s prolonged absence was that Miss Woodford, a great friend of Miss Mortimer’s, was now visiting where she was, and so she and her mamma had decided to remain some time longer.

“The cook has been here some time, sir, and has often heard Miss Violet speak of Miss Woodford,” added the communicative servant, as she opened the door for Norman, who, however, made no further remark or enquiry, but bade her good evening and was gone.

In his letter to Mrs. Brownson, Norman had told her to expect him home in two days hence, but he must go now, at once. Every delay seemed to increase the passionate fever

in his heart, and he could not rest ; he could do nothing but go on until he was by Violet's side again.

He went back to his hotel, and directing that his luggage should be sent after him next day, he took with him merely a portmanteau, and caught a night train, which would enable him, with a short break in the journey, to reach home early the following afternoon.

CHAPTER IX.

NELLY WOODFORD had been a fortnight at Mrs. Arnott's, and in the company of these two dear friends Violet was growing accustomed to walking about the familiar places again. Nelly, on her arrival, could hardly restrain her tears as she embraced Violet, thinking of her own happiness and her friend's desolation, and at first she spoke little of her engagement; but Violet noticed this, and guessing why she avoided the subject, she asked Nelly to tell her everything about her future husband. She took such a lively interest in her happiness, even teasing her affectionately about her once firm determination never to fall in love, that Nelly gladly gave her all her confidence, and admitted, though with pretended indignation, that she really was fairly conquered.

Mrs. Brownson had been down from Ashleigh Court several times to see Violet, and at first sight of her Violet's firmness had

almost given way. And Mrs. Brownson, though ignorant of what had occurred to separate her master and Violet, yet saw, in spite of the latter's effort to be cheerful, how she was suffering, and after the first interview, came away much distressed, for neither had of course mentioned Norman, and all they had in common was so connected with him that the meeting had only been a painful one.

"It is all my young master's pride, I'm certain," the old housekeeper often said to herself. "If my poor mistress had known what would happen, her death would not have been so quiet and happy as it was! When he comes home (and why he stays away so long, I can't tell), I'm sure I shall take on myself to tell him, if no one else will, how pale and heart-broken Miss Violet is looking, for she is, poor darling, though she tries to smile it off. And he shall hear how ill she was too. He can't be vexed with *me* for telling him. Eh, dear! it only seems the other day since he was born, and I held him in my arms, nearly as proud of him as his father and mother!" and Mrs. Brownson would sigh at her inability

as yet to try even in ever so remote and humble a way to help to bring her master and "dear Miss Violet" once more together.

Nelly had been two or three days at Mrs. Arnott's before Norman's name was mentioned between her and Violet, and owing to her ignorance of what had precisely occurred, there was a painful restraint in their intercourse, which was inconsistent with their mutual affection and inner sympathy. But this could not last, and Violet felt that it could not.

The third day after Nelly's arrival they were out alone together, and had to pass Ashleigh Court in their walk. As they drew near it, they both became suddenly silent, and though Violet looked away from the gardens, Nelly felt her arm, which was linked in hers, tremble a moment and then tighten in its grasp. She looked at Violet, and as their eyes met, the gaze seemed to break down the painful reserve between them.

"Violet, darling!" broke from Nelly, "I can't bear it! I can't bear to think you will be always like this! You must be happy yet; it must come all right again between you and Mr. Ashleigh!"

Violet looked earnestly at the pretty face, with its sweet, loving blue eyes, and then said in a low voice,—

“Nelly, I’ve been wanting to tell you. I *could* not before, love, but I must now, and then you will know why I can *never* be anything to Norman Ashleigh again.”

Then, as they walked slowly along the road where she had walked so often by Norman’s side, Violet told Nelly all she knew of what had alienated them from each other, what had occurred to separate them. Her voice trembled at times with a painful effort to speak calmly, and there was a strange bitterness in her tone and in the expression of her pale face, as she told of that crowning blow, the terrible shock of Norman’s utter disbelief in her written protestations and reproaches. As she concluded, Nelly stopped suddenly in her walk and looked at Violet, with an indignant light in her eyes.

“Violet! it must have been Mr. Wilmot! And Norman Ashleigh could believe him before *you*! No, you can never forget that! Oh, Violet, darling, I was right when I said Mr. Ashleigh was stern and haughty, but it is even worse than that!”

“Oh! hush, Nelly! don’t speak so! I—I can’t bear it!” then after a pause, she added gently, “Nelly, darling, I shall feel happier now that you know all about it, and you will never speak to me any more of—it being all right again, will you? I could not bear to feel any restraint between us, and now there is none. Only yourself and Mrs. Arnott, besides, of course, Eleanor, are in my confidence.”

Some impulse moved Nelly to stop again, as she turned still closer to Violet and kissed her earnestly, there on the quiet, lonely road. Neither of them spoke again as they walked back to Rose Cottage, but the silence was an eloquent one, full of sympathy, and so they both felt it.

That evening, when Nelly found herself alone for a few minutes with Mrs. Arnott, she drew close to her side.

“Mrs. Arnott,” she said, “Violet told me all, this afternoon. I can hardly believe it yet! It is so dreadful to think of her going on always like this! I can hardly bear to look at her sometimes, when she laughs and tries to be cheerful, and we know so well what she is feeling all the time. Do you

know, the day I came, I thought her grown taller, but I found out it was because she is thinner, and is always so pale now, that made me fancy it."

Mrs. Arnott sighed heavily, and was going to speak, when Violet came into the room and put an end to her *tête-à-tête* with Nelly.

It was on the very day that Norman was actually on his journey home from London, every moment approaching nearer Ashleigh Court, that Violet and Nelly set out for another walk alone down to the seashore, talking quietly together as usual, little dreaming that Norman was drawing so near home. They did not even know of his arrival in England, for they had not seen Mrs. Brownson that day, and so knew nothing of the letter she had received from him that morning. It was a fine, balmy afternoon, and the two girls sat in Violet's old nook among the cliffs, for she could sit here calmly now, after that visit she had made alone to it, to conquer the terrible emotion excited by the sight of the spot which had been such a favourite with her and Norman.

"Nelly," she said suddenly, with a smile, "is it not strange that, after all, I shall

be the old maid, and you the married woman?"

Nelly laughed, but her hand sought Violet's, and she pressed it earnestly.

"Do you know, Violet, I'm not so certain about my being married. I'm rather alarmed at the prospect yet, and I often tell George I'm only half promised. I'm to do just as I like, you know, as I do now, and am not to be expected to turn very sensible and sedate all at once, or else I'd never have consented to become Mrs. Leslie some day."

But such a happy light shone in Nelly's blue eyes, and such a charming blush rose to her cheek, as showed that her happiness was very deep, though she could not confess it without first displaying a little of her old carelessness and independence.

"I don't feel the least alarmed for Captain Leslie, Nelly," laughed Violet.

Nelly tossed her head and then continued, more seriously,—

"Oh, Violet, you know you *must* come to Windermere next month. You've half promised, and I'm sure Mrs. Mortimer will spare you. I'm longing for you and George to be

introduced, for I'm always talking about you to him, and he is coming to stay with us then."

Violet smiled and gazed silently at the sea for a few minutes, then she turned to Nelly with a strange, dreamy look.

"Oh, Nelly! does it not seem to you now that if anything came to separate you from him, you must die? I used to feel like that, when Norman and I were so happy. If I had known what was really going to happen, I should not have believed that I could live on afterwards just as usual. And yet I can, you see, while my heart is breaking!" and Violet leant her head on Nelly's shoulder as they sat there side by side. "Nelly!" she continued, passionately, "do you know, even yet there are times, especially when I wake at nights suddenly and remember it all, that I think I shall go mad!" then the momentary excitement calmed a little, and she added, "I try very hard not to rebel, not to think it too much for me to bear, but I feel so *very* weary sometimes, Nelly!" and the bitter sigh struck painfully on Nelly's ear.

She offered no consolation, for what could

she say ? She knew it must do Violet good to give vent in this manner to what was in her heart, instead of so carefully hiding all signs of it as she had been doing so long. So Nelly's arm stole silently and gently round her friend's waist with a tender embrace more eloquent than words.

“ Nelly, if I were to hear of his death ! We may do any day. He may be dying now while I am speaking of him ! And it ought to be nothing to me ! ”

And as the words came with a gasp from her lips, Violet trembled so that Nelly was afraid for her.

“ Violet, it is too much for you to sit here so long. Let us walk back again,” she said, with loving firmness, as again placing her arm in Violet's, she led her away from the shore, and in a few minutes she was calm again ; but still she spoke of Norman, as though it were a relief to give vent to the thoughts so long kept silently in her heart.

“ How long he stays away, Nelly ! Am I so hateful to him, that even yet he cannot bear the possibility of meeting me, even as a stranger ? ” and her lips quivered proudly.

“ Violet, I *cannot* help wishing that papa

or Harry, anyone indeed, had been in the habit of corresponding with Mr. Ashleigh. It seems to me that if he had not been so cut off from everyone in England, after your —separation, he must have found out how he had been deceived, no matter how it was! And yet he did not believe *you*, after all his love and knowledge of you!" Nelly exclaimed, forgetting everything but her perplexity and indignation.

The proud, painful flush which rose to Violet's face alone indicated what she felt.

"I ought *never* to have written that letter, after the one he wrote to me," she said, quietly; "I should have known that after *that*, with one so proud as he is, my struggle was wasted. He could think me capable of any dissimulation, when he had once believed I had already been deceiving him, when he had renounced me as he did, without even asking me for an explanation or supposing one to be possible. But I did not know, I *could* not have believed it would be so. There are times yet when I cannot believe it of him, Nelly."

They walked on silently, and passed the gardens of Ashleigh Court without speaking.

How quiet and deserted now were the familiar walks and dear, shady spots once daily frequented by Norman and herself, so often accompanied by the dear one who had been taken from them while they were yet happy in each other's love !

So absorbed was Violet in her overwhelming recollections, that she did not see one of the servants come from the side garden gate towards herself and Nelly until she was close upon them. The girl was one well known to Violet, having been in service at Ashleigh Court some years.

“I was just going to Mrs. Arnott's, miss, to bring you this,” she said, handing Violet a note. “It is from Mrs. Brownson, miss. She would have come to see you herself, but early this morning she slipped and sprained her ankle, so it will be some days before she can stir. She is so sorry, because I know she wanted to see you to-day, miss.”

As the girl turned back into the gardens, Violet read the note, which told her of Norman's expected return home the next evening. Her heart seemed to stand still as she read, but she went on without looking up.

Mrs. Brownson guessed, though she did not exactly write it in so many words, that Violet must return home at once now, and was evidently distressed that she could not see her again. "I only got my master's letter this morning," she wrote, "and I have, let you know at once, miss, for I knew you ought to know, and you will not think me forward for saying so."

There was no wish expressed for Violet to come and see her, no request to that effect, the old housekeeper had too much delicacy to dream of asking her to enter Ashleigh Court; but none the less Violet knew how she must wish it, if it were possible.

Violet was trembling very much as she silently gave Nelly the note to read.

"Oh, Violet!" escaped Nelly's lips as she looked up from it again; but Violet was calmer now. There had been a terrible struggle in her heart for a few seconds, but it was over now.

"Nelly," she said, with quiet earnestness, "will you go on and—and tell them. Mamma had better know at once, because we must go home now, you know, either to-morrow or early the day after. I shall not be long;

I shall be back by four o'clock, for dinner. I am going in to see Mrs. Brownson."

Nelly started, but Violet went on,—

"I may never see her again, love! I can never come here again now, at least it is so uncertain. I know she feels this herself, though she does not like to ask me to go to her. I am very fond of her, as you know, Nelly. She has always been so kind to me, and for grandmamma's sake, too, I cannot go away without saying good-bye to her."

Only those who knew Violet well, who knew her proud, deeply sensitive nature well, like Nelly, could have appreciated the generous sacrifice she was making of her pride—to her kindness and affection for one who, though her inferior, was also her valued friend—in thus going voluntarily once more under Norman Ashleigh's roof, which was once to have been hers, going into his house, after all that had occurred since she left it. Nelly knew better than to try and dissuade her.

"I will go on then," she said, and with a very eloquent look she pressed Violet's hand a moment. "Oh, Violet, darling!"

she whispered, and then turned away again, while Violet opened the gate and stood once more in the garden of Ashleigh Court.

For a moment she felt powerless to go on, under the weight of emotions crowding on her throbbing heart. Then she began to walk very quickly, not looking to either side, straight up the avenue, until she came in front of the house. She went quickly up the steps and rang at the door, where she had been so accustomed to go in herself without waiting to be admitted. As she waited there before the door, with memories so vivid and painful almost overpowering her, Violet's heart beat nearly to suffocation, and it was a relief when the door was opened by a servant who was a stranger to her. She asked if she might be shown up to the house-keeper, and then silently followed the servant up the stairs she knew so well. It was an ordeal for her to walk quietly, while she was longing to run and not pause a second, as she trod the familiar stairs and passages of her once happy home,—too happy, alas! —which she visited now for the last time. Mrs. Brownson was in her sitting-room,

and on reaching it Violet turned to the servant,—

“I need not give you my name; Mrs. Brownson will know me;” then she tapped at the door herself, “May I come in, Mrs. Brownson?” and then without waiting for an answer she went in.

Mrs. Brownson was lying on the sofa as she entered. “Oh, Miss Violet, God bless you!” she exclaimed.

The door not yet being shut, the words reached the ears of the servant outside, who wondered who the young lady was who knew the housekeeper so well. Violet stayed for more than half an hour with Mrs. Brownson, and she was more than rewarded for her visit by the old housekeeper’s gratitude and delight at seeing her. When Violet’s time was up and she rose to go, and placed her hand in her old friend’s, there were tears in both their eyes.

“I shall *never* forget, Miss Violet, darling, your kindness, and more than that, in coming *here* to see me! Forgive me, miss, but if I could but see you happy before I die—if I *could* call you mistress, like I once thought I so certainly should!”

Violet shook her head gently, and with another earnest grasp of the hand and a whispered "Good-bye, Mrs. Brownson," she was gone, fearing to let her emotion master her.

On her way downstairs, Violet had to pass the landing where hung the portrait of Rupert Ashleigh, unless she went down by the servant's part of the house. She had not looked at the picture on her way up, she had passed it quickly, but now that she was alone, some fascination impelled her, painful as it might be, to raise her eyes to it, and once having done so, she remained transfixed, almost unconscious of where she was, looking up at the stern, beautiful face of the youthful cavalier whom Norman so strangely resembled. Violet's hands were tightly clasped, as she stood motionless, still as the picture which held her to the spot. So absorbed was she that she did not hear the sound of footsteps on the stairs, behind her, and only when she heard some one almost close to her did she start and look round, to find herself face to face with Norman Ashleigh! A sickening sensation of faintness came over her, and for a minute

she felt helpless, powerless to stir. Then a burning flush rose to her face, and she covered it with her hands. Norman advanced a step towards her, and then she seemed to receive power to move. A low, short cry escaped her, as she rushed quickly past him, down the stairs, straight to the entrance hall, and she was going to the door, which was open, when the servant who had brought her the note came forward and stopped her, knowing well, by Violet's face, that she had seen Norman.

"I have been waiting for you, miss," she said, "for I knew it must be you. Banks told me you had gone up to see Mrs. Brownson. My master took us all by surprise, miss, for he had written to say he was to be expected to-morrow; but he told Charles that circumstances had obliged him to come to-day. He has only brought his portmanteau with him. He has not been ten minutes in the house, and I came at once and told him that Mrs. Brownson was laid up and that you were with her. I hope I did right miss, I thought it was best. And he said he was going to his own room for an hour, not to Mrs. Brownson's, miss,"

and the girl spoke with respectful and unobtrusive concern.

“No, he did not come; I met him on the stairs, Jane, thank you; never mind;” and with these few words, spoken with a painful effort, and as if she scarcely knew what she said, Violet was gone. Down the avenue, through the garden gate she went, with breathless, unnatural speed, looking straight on before her. Then she stood a minute. She could not go back yet to Mrs. Arnott’s, oh, no! she must be alone. So she walked on in feverish haste down the road, back to the seashore, never stopping until she sat down panting and exhausted in her favourite nook, and then resting her burning face in her hands, she sobbed out aloud in her agony. Oh! it was too much! He had come back and found her—where? Betraying her weakness, her love, in so sure a manner, and *he* was the one now of all the world from whom she would have hidden it. He had cast her off, and his first sight of her on his return was to find her standing fascinated, as it were, by the picture which resembled him. Oh! there are some things too much for pride

to endure ! If she could be anywhere far away, anywhere but here so near him ! If she could have died in that moment, it would have seemed easiest to Violet in her distraction. Ten minutes or more she might have sat there, motionless now that her sobs had ceased, when she was roused by hearing someone approach, and before she could look up, Norman was by her side, speaking to her in a voice of such deep emotion as never in her life had she heard before, even from him.

“Violet!—may I call you so?—forgive me ! I *must* speak to you. Violet, will you hear me ?”

He had followed her then, guessing where she might be found ! Her friends had told her rightly ; he had discovered how he had wronged her, and had come to ask her forgiveness ! Violet could not believe it at first, though the words, and the voice she had not heard for so long, thrilled through her with a terrible emotion. Oh ! the agony of that moment for Violet !

She rose quickly, for she saw him standing before her with folded arms, but she would not look at his face. On her own the proud

flush had deepened, and she stood half turned from him, her heart beating terribly as she spoke in a voice she vainly tried to render firm,—

“ You can ask me that ? You have found out how you wronged me, and you can come to ask me to forgive you, relying perhaps on the weakness which mastered me for a moment and which you witnessed ? Oh ! why was it permitted ! ” she exclaimed bitterly, as she moved a step further away from Norman, and would have left him thus, but he spoke again, and she seemed *forced* to listen to that voice in its passionate pleading.

“ I was *wrong* to ask you to forgive me, to *name* the word to you before I had begged of you to listen to me. Will you not believe that it escaped me unconsciously ; could I insult you so as to ask you to forgive me first before hearing all I have to say ? Violet, you *must* listen to me ! If you reproach me then for asking your forgiveness, and bid me leave you, I will go without a word ! ”

But she did not turn towards him. Though her heart might break, she could not yield.

“Why should I listen to you? What *can* you say that I should care to hear *now*? We are nothing to each other, never can be again. Was it not your own act to make it so? Why do you stay, causing yourself only useless pain? Don’t you know there are some things which *cannot* be explained away, too much for pride to endure? I do forgive you, I did so long since, but I can *never* forget! I *could* have done so, I *did* so once; I laid my pride aside, in consideration of yours. I sacrificed it to my too great faith in your love and confidence, and wrote myself to you my own defence and appeal, and you scorned my letter, disbelieved my written words! I am not an angel, Norman Ashleigh, and I can *never* forget that! Why should we speak longer? it is only useless,” she added more gently, as again she would have left him, still without having looked at him.

But this time he followed her, and again stood before her.

“You can never reproach me as all through my life I shall reproach myself, Violet Mortimer! But you *must* hear me, how cruelly I was duped and how I *did not* disbelieve

your word, your letter, how I was never allowed the chance of doing so, incredible as this may sound to you. I have been hastily blinded by pride and jealousy, perhaps, but those who were enemies to both of us, knew, only too well, how hard it would be to make me believe you false ; they knew, only too well, that I would have *died* rather than disbelieve your word. Violet, will you listen to me now ? ”

As Norman spoke, a strange bewildering light seemed breaking in on Violet’s soul. What was he saying ? That he had *not* disbelieved her word, her letter, that the chance had never been given him ! With a wild, indescribable emotion in her throbbing heart, she turned and raised her eyes to Norman’s face. She should not have done so if she wished to remain unyielding and firm. She met his gaze, looking down upon her with a strange, mute pleading, painful in its intensity, with a world of love and tenderness. She did not understand how it could be, what he was going to say to her ; if she tried to understand, it seemed all a mystery still ; she only knew it was Norman who was standing there before her, who had just spoken words

which seemed to lift away all her darkness and desolation, Norman, whom she had trusted and believed from the first hour of their acquaintance, when they had talked together on this very spot.

For a moment she remained thus, looking up into his face, then she advanced a step and stretched out both her hands.

“Norman!” she said, in a broken voice.

He took the little hands in both his own, and again she looked up to him with eyes full of undying love and faith.

“And *I* would rather die than disbelieve *your* word,” she whispered.

And the next moment Norman had folded her to his heart, and on his breast with his strong, protecting arm around her, Violet sobbed out her unutterable joy, her strange, almost too great rapture. Norman could not speak, he could only keep her there, safe and fast against his heart, his darling, his “little Violet.” She had forgiven him *all*, in her entire trust; she was his own again, satisfied with his simple assertion, before she had listened to his full explanation. He spoke at last, in a voice solemn in its deep emotion,—

“Violet! if ever through our life I should, through haste or my fatal pride, be tempted to utter even *one* harsh word to you, the memory of this moment, of your trust and forgiveness, so true, so great, shall be all potent to restrain me, my darling!”

Violet looked up through her tears, as the old endearing word thrilled upon her ears once more, and she saw that the tears were standing in Norman’s eyes, those rare, precious, manly tears. She trembled so still, that as Norman released her from his embrace, he made her sit down again on her accustomed seat. Then, placing himself by her side, he told her of his meeting with Eleanor and the terrible confession she had made to him, and before he went further, he gave Violet the few lines written to herself, wishing to spare her the hearing from his lips, Eleanor’s unblushing avowal of her love for himself.

The colour rose painfully to Violet’s face as she read it, but Norman took her hand again and kept it fast in his all through the telling of that painful story, which he told

as gently as possible and as briefly as was compatible with the full understanding of each detail.

Violet listened like one thunderstruck, shuddering at the malice of which she and Norman had been the victims, and at the awful death that had overtaken Louis Wilmot, and in her agitation her hand trembled even in Norman's strong grasp. But above all rose the overpoweringly sweet thought that Norman had *not* disbelieved her, that he would have been incapable even in the first instance of listening to anything against her, but for that one proof which was indisputable, her own letter to Louis Wilmot, as it had appeared to him, which he would have sent back to her at once if delicacy had not prevented him from disregarding Eleanor's request and rendered him unwilling to draw trouble or suspicion upon her. Violet could hardly realize her happiness yet, that the weary weight she had thought to carry through life was lifted away entirely, had indeed never existed in reality.

Norman paused a few moments when his tale was told, as he showed Violet her

unposted letter to himself, and then again took it from her hands.

“Violet,” he said at last, “you must let me keep this always, as my most precious treasure, for you can *never* restore the others to me which I sent back in my blindness,” and his voice trembled slightly. “Why *was* I so blinded as not to know at once that I was duped!” he continued. “Violet, if I had known or suspected — Eleanor’s — feeling towards myself, I must have had a glimmering of the truth when that letter came; but I had no suspicion, I never had, I never thought of her at all, Violet, least of all to suspect *that* of her, or that she and Louis Wilmot had any interest in common. But all through my life I must reproach myself! How could I write that letter to you, my darling! But I was mad, blinded by an agony I could hardly realize. Violet, they did well, for their purpose, to keep this from me,” and Norman looked at the letter he held in his hand. “And all this time I had stayed away, not daring to trust myself at home, going from place to place, seeking in vain for peace and forgetfulness, knowing nothing of this precious token of your generous

love. Violet, can you *ever* forget the cruel insult I seemed to offer you as my only answer to it?"

"Oh, Norman! don't you know that I am now repaid for *all*! You must promise never to reproach yourself, not to let it trouble you again, dear, after to-day. I could not *bear* to think you should. You must forget it all, as I do. It seems to me now that I ought to have known that my letter could not have reached you, that you would be incapable of scorning it, and yet I did not, you see, Norman. And oh, Norman! I have thought so hardly of you sometimes, and you were suffering so bitterly all the while! I felt so hard and bitter, so fierce almost against you, only this afternoon when you came and found me betraying my—my love for you, in your own house, and all the time you knew the truth, Norman!" and she looked up with a gaze of even more than her old love and confidence.

"How I longed to take you in my arms, Violet, then and there, and beg for your forgiveness, when I was permitted to surprise you in your generous errand! My darling! if you had died of that illness! If I had come

home at last to find out the truth too late, to hear of your death, to look only upon your grave, my life would have been one long despair, a living death! And you were so near to death, she told me, Violet! Thank God you were spared!" and Norman's face was stamped with an emotion almost fierce in its intensity.

There was no one near or in sight, no human witness to these moments of reunion, and as they sat there side by side Norman drew Violet closer to him and kissed her fervently.

"Nothing can ever separate us again, nothing but death can come between us now; you will be my wife now, at last, little Violet."

She looked up with her old joyous smile, and the happy love-light shining in her eyes.

Forgetting the time, they sat on there together, and what wonder? And mingled with her joy, there was a delicious peace in Violet's heart, greater than ever she had known before, for now no visions of coming sorrow, no forebodings of separation rose up before her mind, as they once had at times in the past even in her greatest happiness. That

was over now ; they had both suffered, she and Norman, and sweet, certain hope showed only the bright vision of an existence of perfect union, a happiness as great as may be in this world.

The sun was setting when they came at last from their retired nook and walked together slowly from the shore.

“ Norman, how terrible it must have been for Eleanor to tell you all ! There must be some repentance in her heart to make her wish to repair what she had done, to enable her to make such a confession. And she is dying, and so wretched ! This must make it easier for us to forgive her, because *we* are so happy. At first it seemed too hard, I felt as if I *could not* forgive her ; but that is passed ! What a life she has had ! How shall I tell mamma ? ”

“ Violet, *I* can never tell her I forgive her ; you must not ask me. It is impossible ! ” and Norman spoke quickly and passionately.

“ Oh, Norman ! ” and Violet looked up painfully.

“ Ask me *anything* else, Violet, but not that, to forgive Eleanor. If it were only *me*

she had injured, only *I* who had suffered, it would be easy ; but I *cannot* forgive the cruel sorrow, the agony she has made me cause *you*, so as nearly to kill you, my darling ! ”

Violet did not remind him that it was his duty, as a Christian, to forgive Eleanor, she knew that thought would come to him later, when he should be calmer ; but now, in his agitation, with that stern look on his face, she would not irritate him, so she only said very tenderly,—

“ But if *I* ask you, Norman, I know you won’t refuse ? It is my first request, and I know you will grant it, however hard you feel it at first,” and she looked up, her perfect trust shown in her gaze.

He stopped and took her hand, and his proud lips quivered.

“ You are right, Violet. I cannot refuse you *anything*, even that I forgive Eleanor Wilmot. I will tell her so with my own lips, if necessary, for your sake.”

She knew how hard the struggle had been and how great the love which had conquered.

“ Thank you, Norman ! This is the second time you have forgiven injury for my sake, to please me,” she said, in a trembling voice,

and their thoughts flew back to that night of the ball at Windermere, when Louis Wilmot had insulted Norman, and he had let it pass for Violet's sake, when she had begged him to do so, in her instinctive dread of Louis Wilmot's malice.

"In the past I could never bear to deny you anything, and it must be so more than ever from henceforth, my darling. May God forgive me, Violet, if it was easier to forgive Eleanor because you asked me than because it is my Christian duty! And with your generous example before me too! What should I be without *you*, little Violet?"

The right dispositions had come to him now, as she had known they would after the first bitterness had passed.

"Violet, all this time I have told myself I ought to forget you, I have *tried* to do so, in my blindness, but go where I would, it was impossible. And at times I could not *believe* you false; it felt only like a horrible dream. I *could* not think of you as loving—Louis Wilmot! You rose ever in my mind as the Violet I had known and loved, whom my mother had loved so. Do what I would, I could not think of you as a second Cécile

du Fleur. There was no escape, in my blindness, from believing you weak and false, but *wholly* heartless I *could* not think you ! I dared not trust myself near my enemy who had stolen you from me, as I thought, and so I stayed away until I found how utterly useless and wearisome was my task of trying to forget one who had been dearer to me than life. *Why* did I not come home before, Violet ! You are looking so pale and thin, my darling, and it is I who have caused it.

“Oh, Norman ! you *must* not talk so ;” and Violet smiled in happy reproof until the painful cloud left Norman’s brow and he smiled too with her.

As they came back again to Ashleigh Court, they went together into the gardens for a few minutes, and when they were leaving, they stood at the gate for a while, he leaning against it, and she standing by his side. At the moment, the same recollection struck them both, as their eyes met. It was just four years since they first met, on that very spot.

“Do you remember that morning, Violet ?”

"I was dreadfully ungracious to you, wasn't I ? "

"I believe you would have run away from me, if you could have managed it," he laughed ; "but you can never escape from me again ; you are my own now, hopelessly."

"Are you afraid I shall *want* to escape ? " she asked, with a joyous laugh and a tender glance.

He bent lower and whispered as he took both her hands in his for a moment,—

"My darling, you must not keep me waiting long ; you must promise to be my wife *very* soon."

The bright, happy, tell-tale blush rose to Violet's face, and a moment later Norman had taken his answer from the uplifted glance of her truthful eyes.

CHAPTER X.

HE walked with her to the gate of Mrs. Arnott's garden, but did not go in with her then, for he was to come later, in the evening.

“They'll wonder wherever I've been, Norman!” laughed Violet; “I said I would be back by dinner time, four o'clock, you know, and look!” and she held up her watch, which showed it to be close upon six.

“Tell them to defer their scolding until eight o'clock, when I shall come punctually to bear all the blame of your broken promise;” and having stolen another kiss there in the quiet garden, Norman let her go at last, and watched her until she disappeared into the house.

Mrs. Mortimer was lying down, so Violet went at once into the room where Mrs. Arnott and Nelly were sitting together.

“Why, Violet, what *have* you been doing, love?” exclaimed Mrs. Arnott. “We waited

dinner some time, and then concluded you must be having a *tête-à-tête* repast with Mrs. Brownson."

"But we were just beginning to get uneasy, and I was coming to look after you," said Nelly. "But what has Mrs. Brownson been doing to make you look so radiant, for you *do*, Violet!" and both she and Mrs. Arnott looked earnestly and enquiringly at Violet, for they saw something had happened.

She came and stood close by Mrs. Arnott.

"Oh, Mrs. Arnott! I thought my life's happiness was all over, and—it is only beginning! It has all come back to me, so perfectly!" and in her overwhelming joy and emotion, she leant her head on Mrs. Arnott's shoulder and cried freely, as she had done on Norman's breast two hours before.

In their happiness, Mrs. Arnott and Nelly waited with loving patience until Violet's kindly relieving sobs had ceased, and in little more than half an hour afterwards they had heard the whole story from her lips, told as kindly as possible with regard to Eleanor, for in her great, complete happiness, Violet

could not grudge charity and forgiveness to one who had paid so dearly for injuring her and Norman, and who had, after all, been but the victim and instrument of another. And Violet knew, besides, what it must have been to love Norman in vain, especially to one like Eleanor, who had never had a wish denied in her life before. It had been terribly hard at first to forgive, more than all at the thought, "If I had died, what would Norman have felt!"

But the struggle was over, as we have seen, almost before she had heard the whole story from Norman's lips, and she was able to tell it all now with a patience which Mrs. Arnott and Nelly could not feel possessed of as they listened in their amazement and indignation.

And Violet had a painful duty now to perform, that of telling her stepmother of the guilt and wretched fate of the daughter she had so spoiled and idolized. It was useless to keep any of the truth from her, for Eleanor could not be allowed to die without seeing her mother again, and Mrs. Mortimer would hear all from her lips less gently than from Violet's.

Violet's task was less painful than she had imagined. Mrs. Mortimer was shocked and horrified at what she heard; but, softened as her heart had become under Violet's influence, it was still weak and selfish to a great extent, and ailing as she herself was, she could not feel to the full the misery of the daughter who had been so ungrateful to her, and without whom she had now learnt to live so contentedly. She did not appear to feel much shame for Eleanor's guilt; she threw the whole blame on Louis Wilmot, venting fretful reproaches on his memory, for his wickedness and his cruelty to her daughter.

Violet was relieved, but at the same time, to a fine generous nature like hers, it was not easy to understand one so weak and shallow and so little endowed with sensitiveness as her stepmother's. But Mrs. Mortimer was firm on one point, as Violet was pleased to find; she must see Eleanor.

"She is my daughter, after all, Violet," she said, "and I cannot let her stay in such a horrid place as she must be in now. I knew she was going into a consumption before we lost sight of her. Her father

died of it ; but it is all this trouble that must have brought it on her. To think of her coming to this, and I used to be so proud of her ! I spoiled her, Violet, *you* know that ! ” and Mrs. Mortimer shed tears again as she spoke. “ How *could* she bring herself to tell everything to Norman Ashleigh ! But she was always able to do anything she was once determined on ; she was always so strong-willed ! ”

Then turning again to Violet, she went on,—

“ What a deal you’ve gone through, and I knew so little about it. I can’t think how you kept it all so quiet, love, even before you were ill ! And now Norman Ashleigh will not let me keep you much longer, I know. I’m so glad you’ll be happy at last, Violet dear, but what shall I do without you ? ” and she kissed Violet as she spoke.

She was too much upset to come down-stairs again that evening, she said, and she bade Violet excuse her to Norman. She would see him next day, but did not feel equal to it to-night, and perhaps in her heart of hearts Violet felt that it would be a relief to Norman to be allowed to

postpone a little longer his meeting with Eleanor's mother. He came that evening as Mrs. Arnott, Nelly, and Violet sat together expecting him, Violet vainly trying to calm the beating of her heart and to hide the colour that kept coming and going in her face every moment. As Norman entered, she had one of Mrs. Arnott's children on her knee, and she tried hard to conceal her agitation by talking to the child.

"Norman!" and Mrs. Arnott rose to meet him with outstretched hand, "this is the happiest day I have had since Harry died!"

The colour rose for a moment to Norman's face in the embarrassment of meeting again these two dear friends of Violet's, who knew so well now the whole painful story of the past. But it was only for a minute, and then he spoke, with his emotion expressed in his eyes as they were bent upon her.

"Thank you," he said, very earnestly. "Mrs. Arnott, I shall *never* forget that you saved Violet for me, that but for you my life might have been one long despair, that she might have died but for you!" and he glanced across at Violet, who looked up amid her happy blushes, as Nelly too went to welcome

Norman with a frank, joyful smile on her pretty face.

“Miss Woodford,” he said, as he took her offered hand, “you must let me congratulate you very sincerely. Violet has told me of your engagement,” and he smiled.

She saw he would not be the first to revert to the past, to their friendly skirmishes ; she saw that he felt she might not like him to do so.

“Thank you, Mr. Ashleigh,” she said heartily. “I’m sure you laughed when you heard of it. I’m sure you rejoiced to think how entirely I was beaten, did he not, Violet ? ”

“Violet won’t tell tales of me, I know,” he laughed ; “but I may fairly be considered to have had the best of our skirmishes, may I not ? But when I have the pleasure of Captain Leslie’s acquaintance, I shall certainly be tempted to tell him that he has already made the most difficult and perfect conquest possible for him to achieve, and that he must be very brave indeed to have attempted it.”

She blushed as she met his gaze fixed smilingly upon her, and looked at Violet in comic indignation.

There had not often been a happier evening anywhere than that at Rose Cottage, of the reunion of the two who had been so long and so cruelly separated. Norman and Violet sat side by side, close together, as though to assure themselves that it was not all a happy dream. Norman played for them, and at the well known touch which she had yearned so often and so hopelessly to listen to, Violet's tears burst forth again, and she bade Norman not to mind her, but to go on playing, as it was only joy that made the tears come. And then in turn she sang for him, and sang without that terrible pain which had so long been the constant consequence of her effort to sing without utterly breaking down.

It was late when Norman left Rose Cottage that night. There was so much to be told, so much to be said in that joyous reunion. As he rose at last to go, Mrs. Arnott detained him a minute.

“Norman,” she said, with slight hesitation, “I shall see Mrs. Lester to-morrow most likely. Shall I tell her simply of her cousin’s death, and nothing more? She asks me constantly if we have heard anything of them.” Then she hesitated a little

again before she went on, “I think she ought to know all, or nearly all, in justice to you and Violet. She is certain to connect your separation in some way with the Wilmots, and she cannot have any idea, any more than we had, of the real truth.”

Norman knew her meaning, and as Violet stood by him, he took her hand in his as he answered Mrs. Arnott.

“ You are, right, Mrs. Arnott,” he said. “ The Lesters must hear the truth. It is not pleasant to have to spread the story of the malice from which we have suffered, but it *must* be so. Violet’s name shall not be coupled with—Mr. Wilmot’s for an instant that we can prevent. His persistent attentions in the past, and then our known alienation, may have caused it to be so, and I cannot bear it, Mrs. Arnott ! ” and as Norman spoke, almost sternly in his indignation, his eyes were bent on Violet with a world of tenderness in their gaze.

They stood at the door together lingeringly, as they bade “good-night,” he and Violet.

“ Good-night, my darling ! ” he whispered as he held her in his embrace and took the kiss, which must always be doubly tender

now, from her lips ; “ to-morrow, then, at eleven, I will come for you, and you must ride to the Hollow with me. Poor little Charley ! how rejoiced he will be to see his mistress again ! ”

Violet smiled, and he added,—

“ And I have promised Mrs. Brownson that you will go and see her again before we start. Violet ; she will not easily forget your goodness in going to her to-day, nor shall I, for I know what it must have cost you. Oh, Violet ! I little thought of the happiness I was coming home to when I made up my mind to come back to England. I used to fancy in the past that it would not be possible to love you more than I did ; but somehow you are doubly precious to me now, my darling ! ”

She watched him down the moonlit garden, and then went back into the house.

“ Mrs. Arnott,” she whispered, as they bade good-night, “ you were right, you see, when you used to try to make me hope, when I was ill ; but, you know, it did seem so impossible ; I could not ! It all looked so dark and hopeless to me. Mrs. Arnott, you will be our best, dearest friend always, mine and Norman’s.”

They went upstairs, and Nelly drew Violet into her room.

“ We must have a talk to-night, Violet, for I know you are in no humour for sleep, and I’m not either. I shall stay awake till morning, thinking of it all, I know. I knew you *must* be happy in the end, darling, though since you told me all, it did seem impossible ! But, Violet, it is plain to be seen that you’ll be thoroughly spoiled,” added Nelly, wisely.

“ Why, Nelly ? ”

“ Oh, you know very well ! Why, it is easy enough to see, even by the way Mr. Ashleigh looks at you, that he’ll be ready to shoot anyone who dares to speak *one* unkind word to you. He has made up his mind to spoil you, that’s certain. Do you know, Violet, I’m half inclined to get up a temporary quarrel with George ; the making up must be so delicious ; ” then kissing Violet earnestly, she added, seriously, “ Never mind me, love. It is because I’m so happy on your account that makes me talk such nonsense. I have thought so badly of Mr. Ashleigh, though you would not let me speak it out plainly, and now I’m *so* sorry ? But we could never have dreamt of the truth, could we ? ”

And it is no use for you to tell me not to enlighten them all at home about it. I *must* tell them all; it is only just to you and Norman Ashleigh. He would wish it for you sake, so you must allow it for his. How strange that, after all, you and I are going to be married about the same time, darling!"

Nelly was right; Violet was little in mood for sleep when at last she went to her own room. How often she had lain awake during the nights of her sorrow, shuddering at her desolation, and now she could not sleep for joy; she could only lie there quietly, wondering at her happiness, which, in a few hours, had been restored so perfectly! She had thought to be henceforth a stranger to Norman, and all at once she was his promised wife again, his own Violet, whom he had *never* doubted really at all, for there had been no escape for him from the cruel proof presented to him. She had yearned so, strive against it as she would, for his voice, to meet his smile, for the presence which formed all her happiness, and now it would be hers till the end. Until death should separate them, nothing else would. Until now, Violet thought she

had never felt *perfect* joy, because she had never known in the past what it was to suffer hopeless sorrow, and she almost longed to sing out aloud in her rapture, the song of thanksgiving which was welling up in her heart that night.

CHAPTER XI.

HARDLY a fortnight later Eleanor Wilmot died, in her mother's house.

Mrs. Mortimer and Violet had gone back to London a few days after Norman's return home, and a day or two after, Mrs. Mortimer went alone to visit Eleanor, who at first would not see her mother, but refused to allow her to be shown up to her. But wretchedly ill as she was, she was incapable of long resistance, and so the mother and daughter met again, in that poor lodging. Louis Wilmot had been buried two or three days before, with little better than a pauper's funeral, and Eleanor had been obliged to keep her bed ever since. Her altered appearance had shocked Mrs. Mortimer dreadfully, and she was horrified that *her* daughter should be living in such a miserable place. Now that she really beheld Eleanor's wretchedness and desperation, she felt it more than when she had only been told of it,

for it came home so dreadfully, even to her weak, shallow nature, when her daughter told her plainly that it was to her indulgence and example she owed most, if not all, of her misery. It was a hard struggle before Eleanor would consent to be removed to her mother's house, but for once Mrs. Mortimer was firm, and Eleanor yielded, as though the contest wearied her in her dying state. She let herself be taken home, on condition that she must not be asked to see anyone but her mother and the nurse.

"Let me die quietly," she had said; "I shall not trouble you long."

Once at home, she lay silently in a kind of sullen despair, waiting for the death which, wretched as she was, she dreaded. She knew there was no hope of recovery for her, and would hardly reply to the doctor's questions. For two days she refused to see Violet, who came into her room at last without any formal permission, and spoke her forgiveness in a few gentle words. From that moment Eleanor changed altogether in her demeanour. She became wonderfully softened, as though she could hardly believe that Norman and Violet had

really forgiven her, and her hard, proud nature gave way at last.

"I could not have done it, Violet," she said, "I could not have forgiven it, in your place."

She even consented to see Norman, and, with Violet by his side, he spoke to Eleanor gently and forgivingly, and *she* knew (none better) how hard the struggle must have been before he could bring himself to retract the stern, bitter words of unforgiveness he had spoken on that terrible day of her confession to him. He stayed only a few minutes, knowing that his presence must be painful to her. They parted in peace, and Eleanor looked her last on him she had loved and hated and injured. He did not come again to her, though he was remaining in London to be near Violet, for any further interview between them would have been only useless and painful. Her mother's affection for her seemed to return during these last days, for Eleanor herself softened strangely towards her, and she appreciated now the early love and indulgence her fond, weak mother had lavished on her.

She prepared herself with all her native

resolution (which had been so sadly misdirected) to meet death with resignation and patience, instead of her previous despair, and she died with a peace in her heart which lately would have seemed impossible to her, and which she herself felt she had little deserved to experience. They gave her a quiet funeral ; few of her friends knew until her death that she had returned home, and fewer still knew of the wretched poverty in which her mother had found her. Within three weeks of each other Louis and Eleanor Wilmot had gone to their graves ; but to *her* it had been granted to die among her friends and to have her last hours soothed by the forgiveness of those she had injured.

Two months after Eleanor's death Violet became Norman's wife, at last. A companion had been found for Mrs. Mortimer before Violet left her, and much as she lamented to Norman the loss she would sustain when Violet became his wife, she could obtain very little compassion from him on this point, kind and attentive as he tried always to be to her. Evidently Norman considered that Violet had been kept too long from him already, and he was not disposed to wait

patiently for her any longer. They were married very quietly indeed, on account of Eleanor's recent death. And it suited both their inclinations better too; their union seemed holier and more solemn, surrounded only by those who knew the story of their long love and separation and joyous complete reunion.

Nelly Woodford stood by Violet, her only bridesmaid, feeling only less happy than she should on her own coming wedding day, and Harry was Norman's groomsman. Mrs. Arnott was there too, with the tears of joy in her eyes as she looked at Violet's face of such deep happiness. The thought of Mrs. Ashleigh was with Mrs. Arnott at that moment, as it was with the bride and bridegroom, and the blessing she had given them on her death-bed came back to them now with a deep, precious intensity. They were going away only for a few days at present; later, in some weeks, after they had been at Nelly's wedding, Norman was going to take Violet abroad; but now they wished for nothing but Ashleigh Court, to be alone there together for a while.

CHAPTER XII.

IT was evening, a week later, and they were at home, in their own Ashleigh Court, alone together, husband and wife at last. Mrs. Arnott waited to receive them, and then went away, leaving them to spend the first sacred evening after their return by themselves. It was a cold, frosty night, and they sat in the drawing-room with closed curtains and a cheery fire. Violet had just finished singing to Norman's accompaniment, and now she half sat, half knelt on the hearth-rug, gazing into the fire.

Norman leant against the mantel-piece and was looking down at her very earnestly.

“ What a brown study you are in, Violet ! ”

She looked up with the joyous light dancing in her soft eyes.

“ I always read secrets in the fire, you know,” she said.

"Is what you are thinking of now too great a secret to tell me, Violet?"

"Well, no," she laughed, "I don't think it is." Then very earnestly she went on, "I was only wondering, Norman, if there's anyone in the world so happy as I am, and I was thinking that if I could possibly for a moment grieve for my own sake about the past, I should be very unreasonable and ungrateful, for now it is [all over, like a dream, and I am your wife, and I not twenty yet, Norman."

With a tenderness too deep for words Norman's eyes rested on his young wife as she spoke. But for others' malice she would have been his wife long since, but he *must* not complain.

Was she not doubly precious to him now? He sat down, and she came and stood by him, and he drew her close to him.

"You *are* happy, I think, my darling?" he asked almost with agitation.

"Norman! I don't think I shall answer such a foolish question," and she passed her little hand fondly over her husband's dark locks.

And she did look so happy, so beautiful, as Norman looked at her again. She was

no longer the pale, sad Violet he had found on his return, gazing almost unconsciously at Rupert Ashleigh's portrait.

“Violet, never try to tell me again that you are not beautiful. You *used* to attempt it, you know, but you are my wife now, and I shall not allow it.”

His eyes expressed his fond admiration, so dear, so precious, because it came from Norman.

“Won’t you really, you tyrant? Well, I think I’ll obey you,” she added, with a merry laugh, which was like music in Norman’s ears.

“I wonder what kind of a night it is outside!” he said, after a pause.

“Beautiful and starry, I know, without looking,” she said earnestly. “It *must* be, to-night. Come and see if I’m not right.”

He turned and kissed her.

“How very wise you are, Mrs. Ashleigh! Whatever it is outside, it is beautiful inside to *me*,” he added fervently, as they rose and went to the window.

Violet sang a few joyous, bird-like notes as she drew back the curtains, and they gazed out on to the moonlit gardens.

“Isn’t it beautiful, Norman ! You see I was right,” she whispered. He looked at her, and it may have been the thought of how nearly he had lost her which made him clasp her to his heart again as they stood.

“May our life be as bright,” he exclaimed with emotion. “I little thought, more than four years ago, when my mother went to London, what a treasure she would bring home with her, my own Violet, my little wife !”

The tender brown eyes were raised again to his face with their gaze of unutterable love and happiness. Side by side they stayed a few minutes longer looking out into the gardens of their beautiful home, gazing out into the clear, bright moonlight, emblematic truly, in its radiance, of the happiness, so bright in its sweet, hopeful promise, which was shining round the life’s pathway of Norman and Violet Ashleigh.

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